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by E. Hoffmann Price

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SPICY · WESTERN · STORIES

November, 1941 Vol. 8, No. 4

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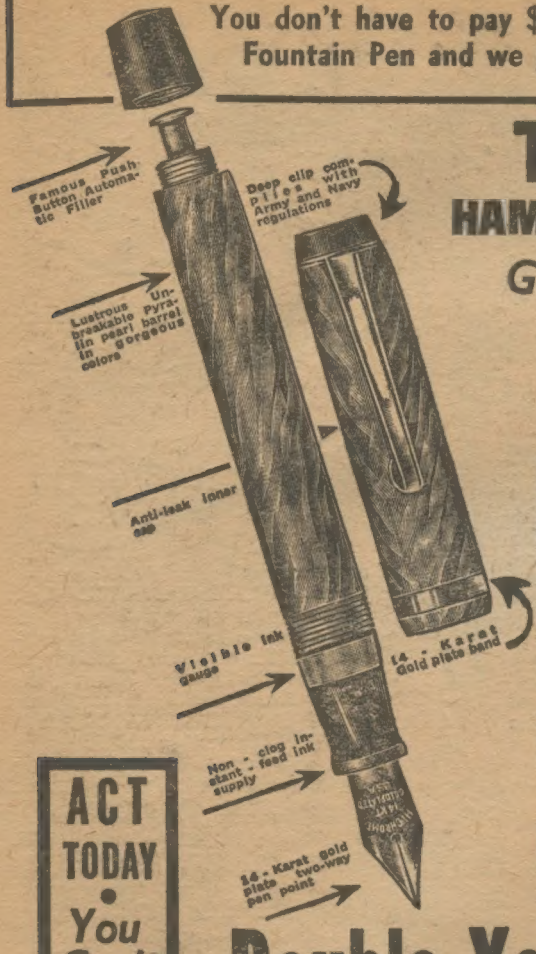
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They called the harness-maker Tanglefoot, because he stuttered with his feet. Girls would have nothing to do with him. He was a laugh. But one girl and some fast shooting changed him . . .

THE GIRL in the second floor room of the Crescent Hotel had not pulled the shades; being a newcomer, she could scarcely know that the Okay Harness Shop as well as the empty darkness of the plain had a view of her window. She was slim and blonde; there was an alluring stretch of arm and waist, a fascinating twist as she pivoted on her toes, drew the turkish towel taut, straight except where curves made it swell. Breckinridge Coleman nearly sewed his fumbling fingers to the unfinished bridle before he dropped awl and wax ends, and decided that a fellow can't stitch a throat-latch while watching the finish of Ida Jordan's bath.

It always took him a long time to move or make up his mind, and when he did, it was usually wrong. At last, concluding that he should not take advantage of a lady's oversight, he stuttered, "G-gosh, she's beautiful," and forced himself to look back at his work. His slow thinking was just a shade too fast, this time, for Ida flung aside

"IT AIN'T SPEED!"

A Novelette

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Tanglefoot was used to ridicule. Now he was getting used to bullets.

the towel . . . and then spent a moment wondering what she could wear. . .

LAUGHTER, and the squeal of violins mocked Coleman. He rose, sighed from loneliness, and from having kept his long, awk-

ward frame hunched at the harness maker's bench until hours after quitting time. He went toward the front, stumbled over a broom, knocked a horse collar from a wall peg, and picked it up. In the darkness of the front of the shop, he looked across the plaza of Dry Prong, Texas; at its further side, he saw the crowd that jammed Oddfellow's Hall; cowpunchers in gaudy silk shirts, the white arms and bare shoulders of girls as they whisked past the open windows, skirts a-whirl. As he watched, each gay gown melted before his eyes, and revealed the lovely figure of Ida Jordan.

Breckinridge Coleman turned his back on the mirth across the plaza, and stumbled back to his work bench. There wasn't a girl in town who would dance with him, or who had anything but a laugh for him. They called him Tanglefoot because he stuttered with his feet, and when he did think of something to say or do, it was always late, and usually it was wrong. So when there was festivity in Dry Prong, Coleman worked overtime.

He was a good harness maker, but now his hands shook, and he prodded his fingers. Finally he flung the awl into a corner, and said aloud, "Damn it, I am going to look until my eyes bug out."

The blonde girl who had just come to town, the one girl who had not laughed at him, had the only pair of silk stockings for miles around, and now she was improving them by the addition of a pair of legs just as unique. Ida and her folks lived at the hotel until they built a ranch house to suit their tastes.

Ida had disappeared from view for a minute or two before Tanglefoot realized what a shock her beauty had been. The impact gave him a daring idea. His heart choked him, and accentuated the half stutter that always made people uneasy when he was around. "Sh-she ain't never seen me," he muttered. "She ain't got the habit of mockin' me."

If he got a dance, an armful of that splendid creature, the other girls might not think he was so funny.

By the time Tanglefoot had most of the soap out of his ears, a half dozen razor cuts on his horse-face, and a beeswax shine on his boots, the exquisite newcomer was at Oddfellow's Hall, and the center of a crowd.

HE WAS locking up the shop when Bird Cage Annie came hobbling down the bird walk. She was bleary-eyed, hatchet-faced, shaky; quarter crazy, and half drunk. Years ago, she had run a dive called the Bird Cage. Now she lived in a shack in the Mexican section. She cackled, "Where you fixing to go, Tanglefoot?"

"Uh—nowhere specially."

"Gimme a quarter, everyone else's happy, why ain't I got a right to be?"

He dug up a handful of change, fumbled with it, dropped most of it. Bird Cage snatched a silver dollar from the dust. "Now I can get good and drunk," she said, giggling. "If you're fixing to dance, you're hours too slow,

you're allus thinking of things when it's too late."

That was so near the truth that he flared up, "It ain't speed that counts, it's moving right ahead, steady."

"That's gospel," the hag cackled, and tottered to the Red Eye Saloon for her dram of forty-rod.

For the first time in his life, Tanglefoot had thought of an apt retort, and he had wasted it on a half wit. That afternoon, those very words would have staved off a general laugh at his expense. But Tanglefoot was not worrying; his new idea, the persistent picture of the shape in the window, they made him feel as if the plaza were paved with purple clouds.

At the door, Todd Hill, the postmaster, stared in amazement. "You dancing, Tanglefoot?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Check your gun."

Tanglefoot fumbled here and there. Todd chuckled. "I mean that there gun poked in your hip pocket. Y'ain't got others hid out, have you?"

Tanglefoot blinked, dragged out a long-barreled pistol that was nearly as awkward as himself. Clumsy, a bit rusty, heavy enough to make a pack mule stagger, it was too large for any other hand in Dry Prong. There was a general laugh, and a cowpoke said, "Bet he's quicker'n greased lightnin' with that there hawg-leg."

There were still some of the town beauties sitting along the wall, since the bigger part of the expected crowd had not yet arrived, and Ida Jordan had monopolized the early arrivals. Tanglefoot blinked and gaped at the white shoulders and luscious bosom exposed by the lowest cut gown he'd ever seen on a nice girl. Her smile included everyone, and Tanglefoot's share, about one percent of the total, gave him blind staggers.

He stood there, two yards from the laughing group, trying to rehearse his lines. They had vanished. His tongue was thick, his lips were dry, he was afraid he would stutter; he never actually did, and that was the worst of it. What made people uneasy was that he seemed about ready to stutter, and then didn't. He fumbled with a sack of Durham, broke a paper, and maneuvered his feet so that he faced the girls along the wall. One of them might give him a dance, just to spite Ida.

They saw him coming. Two breezed for the punch bowl, which had not yet been filled. Three filed for the dressing room, ostentatiously patting their unruffled hair. The hilarity centering about Ida Jordan suddenly stopped. One voice, a laggard's was rumbling, "M'am, you jest watch this; Tanglefoot's aiming to *dance.*"

There was a laugh, soft, tolerant, musical. Tanglefoot heard it blend with the twang of a fiddle string. Then he checked himself, too late. He had trampled a woman's foot, and barged against her knees. He clawed for the wall, caught her shoulders instead, and realized that the mockery behind him had been distracting his attention. "Uh—you dancing—kin I have—?"

The girl on the bench looked up and said, icily. "You've about ruined my feet without dancing

on them." She got up, very briskly, and dashed after the others.

TANGLEFOOT faced the mirth. There was no malice in Ida's laughter. She was a stranger, and appreciative of local humor. If it had been anyone else but Ida, he would have stumbled toward the door and called it another evening; but he still remembered that white figure in the second story window. It was not just one girl who laughed, but all women in one person, damning him.

Worse than that, one of the men in the group, a tall, lean, good looking stranger, was fairly doubled. "Honey," he said to Ida, laying a familiar hand on her shoulder, "we ain't got nothing like this in San Antone!"

Tanglefoot surprised everyone by reaching out with his clumsy paw, jerking the laughing stranger upright, and flattening his face with an acre of palm. "What are you laughing at?"

The stranger did a complete end over end; the floor shook when he landed, clawing at his empty holster. Ida caught Tanglefoot's arm.

"Don't be silly. He didn't mean you." She twisted about, facing the mocker. "Glenn, don't take it up. We simply can't have any trouble with our new neighbors."

One of the group cut in, "Tanglefoot, you better git afore he unchecks his smokepole, he's Jordan's ramrod." Another said, "Glenn Irwin, gun fighter from way back!".

Glenn was on his feet. "If you ain't out of town by morning, you're getting carried out."

Tanglefoot went to the checkroom and got his old pistol. Todd Hill said, "I sure hate to see you leaving, you're the best harness maker old man Wilkins ever had."

The violins were squealing now. Glenn, smiling again, had Emma Hayes from the restaurant. Ida Jordan was dancing past with Ab Feehan. Tanglefoot stood there, watching a gangling grocery clerk trying to get a deeper glimpse into Ida's bodice. Tanglefoot knew more about Ida than the rest of them put together, and here he was, frozen out. He said, "I ain't leaving."

"You're crazy, Tanglefoot. That jasper's poison, he's quick."

"Speed ain't everything."

Having practiced that retort on Bird Cage Annie, it came readily enough as he went to the door. Later, sitting out in the plaza, looking up at the lighted windows, he wondered if his words did have any meaning. A fellow had to be quick on his feet to dance. He had to be quick-witted to keep girls from laughing at him.

He hefted the ponderous pistol. A man had to be speedy in a gun fight. Or else, he needed speed in leaving town.

Later, he went back to the shop and sat down on his bunk in the back room. A hot wind whined in from across the desert. Tanglefoot muttered, "A man might as well be buried as dead on his hoofs and walking around."

He was not riding at dawn. No matter how long he lived elsewhere, there'd never be a girl who would smile at him, for his awkwardness would become worse: he would be thinking of the essence of

Tanglefoot flattened the stranger's face with an acre of palm. "What're you laughing at?"

all women, up there in the Crescent Hotel.

So he lit the lantern, and began to oil the pistol.

CHAPTER II

Another Mistake

AFTER breakfast, Tanglefoot walked across the plaza. Long John White, the town marshal, stopped whittling and nearly swallowed his cud of tobacco.

"You crazy?" he demanded. "You still got time, Glenn's sleeping late, after the dance."

"I'm waiting for him."

Long John stared for a moment, then hobbled to his horse. He said, "I'm aiming to be out of town all day."

He did not want to take sides or see anything; the Jordans, though newcomers, were important folks. Tanglefoot called after the marshal, "Afore you leave, you tell that lady she better pull the shades in her room, in case the next harness maker starts looking into the winder."

Several loungers sat up straight when they heard that. Tanglefoot suspected that he had picked the wrong time for his announcement, but it was a cinch he'd have no chance to do Ida a final favor after he met Glenn Irwin.

Spectators were gathering, as they always did when a feud was about to end in a blaze of guns. Up until now, Tanglefoot had only watched; he had often wondered how the principals felt as they maneuvered for the final meeting in street or alley or bar. The answer seemed simple: you just don't have any particular feelings, though it was odd how a fellow noticed trifles. Like that lizard, blinking at the sun. Like the jingle of coins in one's own pocket. Loud as church bells.

The only way to spend his money before the shooting began was to buy a drink, and that made him think of Bird Cage Annie. The old hag had spoken gospel, saying everyone's got a right to be happy, though there was a big difference between what you're entitled to and what you get. He did not like liquor, so he decided to let Bird Cage Annie drink for him.

She thrust her hatchet face from the window of her shack as he kicked the rickety door. She cackled, "You ain't a ghost yet." Then she reached for the silver he offered. "Seeing as how you ain't going to spend this, it'll shore make me happy. Here, I'll git you a drink outa my bottle."

He killed the several ounces in the half pint.

Bird Cage Annie croaked, "Now don't git hasty, take your time and shoot the — till he doubles up. Didn't you tell me it ain't speed that counts?"

Tanglefoot stumbled in and out among the *jacales,* back toward town. Mexicans lifted their hats as he passed, and crossed themselves. They had never laughed at him, but the respect they now showed was for the presence of the dead.

He went up the narrow, rutted street which led to the plaza. He was still a block away from the square when he heard yelling. A tall man was running down the

board walk that skirted the big open space; Glenn Irwin, without hat or shirt. He was howling, "He said that, the —! He's down in the *jacales?*"

The explosion of wrath shocked Tanglefoot. It jarred the quiet of Dry Prong. He resented the brawling uproar. He had time to wonder at Glenn's white face. There was lots of time. Everything was moving very slowly, like when you're in a dream, and trying to outrun a stampede on foot. That was shaving later on Glenn's cheeks. He must have flung down his razor and grabbed his gun.

TANGLEFOOT hoisted the heavy pistol out of the stiff holster, and thumbed the hammer. He was not shaking a bit, but his thumb slipped, and the gun roared; the kick of the .45 jerked his forearm. Dust and bits of rock spurted up a dozen yards or more short of Glenn Irwin.

Glenn howled at his target, "You —, you will spy on a lady!" He blazed away, still a hundred yards distant. Slugs zinged from a dobe wall; one knocked off Tanglefoot's hat. He stumbled and landed behind a rain barrel. Bullets made splinters blossom out of the wood. "Come out and fight, you yellow whelp!" the charging gunner challenged. "Come out or—"

His gun was empty and he had not winged his man enough to count. Tanglefoot came from cover. The range was still none too good for a clumsy hand. He stumbled along, watching Glenn's limber fingers jack out a cartridge and feed in another, the one finishing shot. Tanglefoot flung himself into a narrow alley.

A shot chewed a long crease in his hip. Glenn cursed, wiped lather off his hand, stepped back into a doorway. In his fury, he had begun to make a fool of himself. Back in the plaza, a crowd was yelling, "Get a shotgun! Use a knife!"

Tanglefoot was used to ridicule. The only thing that really hurt was when women mocked him in their sly way. Men's laughter wasn't bad. He came from cover, his big hand leveling that cannon-sized pistol. A few more yards, and he would be close enough to fire. Glenn was still fumbling with that cartridge. He was fast enough on the trigger, but when it came to reloading, his fingers were all thumbs. Amazed at seeing the mouse turn on the cat, he backed into the doorway of a ruined dobe to win the shelter he needed while shoving in a cartridge.

There was a nail projecting from the wooden jamb. Glenn's pants snagged. That hindered him, just as much as the shaving lather which had dripped to his fingers and hampered his reloading.

Tanglefoot fired. Glenn doubled up, just as his finger snapped the cylinder into place. Tanglefoot halted, deliberately cocked his clumsy gun, and fired again. There must have been a space of several seconds between shots; he did not stop until the hammer ticked on an an empty. Glenn Irwin was too full of holes to make even a sound. He lay there, doubled up and twitching.

Tanglefoot dug up more cart-

ridges, eyed them, shook his head. "Tain't fair. Six for him, six for me." He went to meet the cheering crowd, and as he stumbled along, he fingered his ribs, his hip, his splinter-peppered cheek. By the time he realized that he was not drilled enough to count, the town's voices were howling, "Foxiest trick I ever heard, getting him so mad he couldn't shoot straight! Tanglefoot, didja sure enough see her . . . uh, getting dressed? Damn' fool, in such a hurry he fires on the run. . ."

Tanglefoot said, "Gosh, I shouldn't've said that, mebbe if I apologize it'd be all right."

He went into the empty lobby of the hotel, and clumped up the stairs. Set on his mission, eager and penitent, he forgot to knock at the door of that inspiring room; he barged in and blurted, "Miss Ida, I was aiming to do you a favor, I didn't—"

The blonde yeeped, spun about from the dresser. She still had her hands to her hair, and she was too astonished and outraged to lower them to catch her robe together where it needed catching. Tanglefoot remembered his hat, and snatched it off; he always forgot something important.

"Uh—it's so dang late—what I mean—"

He meant that he had expected to find her dressed.

Ida made a lunge. "Get out of here, you snooping, spying lout! Get out before Glenn kills you!"

"I aimed to tell you—at the dance—about that window—only I didn't get a chance. So this morning I said—"

"Get out, Glenn's looking for you, oh, I hope he finds you!"

She began slapping him right and left, pushing him to the door.

"M'am, I just finished meeting him, he's plumb dead."

Dejected, face stinging from slaps, he stumbled down the hall. A door slammed. Then, a scream. Ida cried, "Oh, my God!"

WHEN he reached the lobby, he saw them carrying Glenn on a door yanked from a vacant house.

Tanglefoot collected his pay, saddled up, and rode out of Dry Prong, for his victory had been wasted. It was time to move.

As he approached the shack settlement, Bird Cage Annie waved a pint, and cackled, "Where you going with your war bag?"

He sighed. "That lady hates my guts. Gosh, I can't undertsand women."

Bird Cage Annie took a gurgling pull at the bottle, wiped the neck on her greasy sleeve, and offered it to Tanglefoot. "You listen to me. It's like I told you, it ain't always speed. Don't you try to be smart and sparkling, 'tain't your game. Jest plug along, let 'em scratch and holler all they please, it's results that count."

He grimaced, gagged, returned the bottle. "Not with women."

The horrible hag snickered. "You got the injun sign on you. Once you find one gal that don't laugh at you, you come back and the others all line up for their turns, no matter how often you fall over your own feet."

She raised the bottle. Whiskey drooled down her chin. "You listen to me, I usta be a woman my-

self. Ladies are jest like other women, only they won't say so."

Tanglefoot rode on. Ida, it seemed, could not understand that

She began slapping him right and left. "Get out of here!"

in blurting out a well meant warning about leaving the shades up, he had been thinking of her in the last few minutes he had expected to live. And it seemed that his mistake lay in not dying at the right time.

CHAPTER III

The New Job

WHEN he reached Fort Sumner, far off hills beckoned, and he moved on. All his flat life had been lived in flat country; and he was not yet far enough from Dry Prong. He found Albuquerque nestling in a bowl beside the headwaters of the Rio Grande, but even that was not far enough. The country did not appeal to him until he came to sombre lava beds and timber clad hills, and Indian pueblos, and cliff dwellings, perched on almost inaccessible shelves. Something about this remoteness invited him, and he stopped in Dos Palos.

There were not more than twenty houses sprawled beside the trail. Some were *dobes,* and others made of unhewn stone and chinked with mud. He was not quite sure whether the men who lounged in the sun were Indians or Mexicans. The women who carried earthen jars of water or bundles of dead wood on their heads had hair black and coarse as a horse's tail, they were stocky, greasy, and their blue skirts and red blouses made them look even more swarthy. A white man stepped out of a store whose sign read "GENERAL MERCHANDISE. FEED & GRAIN, CY SMITH."

He wore a Prince Albert coat, green with age, and buckskin pants.

"Light and set. I'm Cy Smith, mayor of Dos Palos."

Tanglefoot warmed to this cordiality. "I'm Breckinridge Coleman, but they call me . . . uh—Breck."

He had spent days deciding he needed a new name. He was rather relieved that he had not blurted out the one he had resolved to forget. Cy said, "Bet you're from Texas. Lem Fife'll be proud to meet you, he's sorta homesick."

Tanglefoot fumbled with the reins. He did not want anything pertaining to Texas. Cy went on, "Lem's got a lot of cow critters. He could use another hand."

A half-circle of brown stolid faces studied the newcomer. There was not a smile in Dos Palos; not one woman had as much as giggled. Tanglefoot looked up at the snow-capped volcano which had, centuries ago, spread a hundred square miles of glowing lava. He looked about at the red soil, the wooded slopes; the distant pueblos and cliff dwellings suggested that this was the place where one could hide from one's self.

"Where's this Mr. Fife's spread?"

"Out thattaway, mebbe ten-fifteen miles." He pointed, squinted toward the rugged buttes. "Bet that's him now. Kindo funny, he don't usually come in on Wednesdays."

Tanglefoot looked at the far off dust cloud. "Gosh, you must have larruping eyes. I can barely make out it's a wagon."

Cy chuckled. "All that's necessary. Ain't no other buckboard

for a hundred miles around. While you're waiting, tuck into some grub, there's pickles and cheese and crackers."

The invitation warmed Tanglefoot. As he went in, the proprietor picked up a leather bound book and seated himself. Two Indians were pawing over some red bandannas. "If you don't mind, sell them folks stuff if they want something. I'm busy studying for the law, this here is my coat for when I get admitted to the bar."

AFTER ten silent minutes, the Indians grunted, picked up their purchases, and laid down half a dollar. Without a word, they walked out. Tanglefoot sat down on a packing box, and as he ate, he carved Ida Jordan's initials on the cut face of the cheese. He added his own, and then the date of the shooting, back in Dry Prong: an epitaph, so to speak, of beauty dead beyond any resurrection.

A wagon clattered up to the hitching rack. "That's Lem," Cy said, "I'll pretend I'm studying, so you can talk to him about riding with the Diamond F."

Tanglefoot stopped short in the doorway. Instead of a grizzled cattleman, a black haired girl was leaning back, pulling on the reins; neither Spick nor Indian, but all white, a smooth, rose flushed white with just the faintest wind tan. Her pink calico dress had gone many a mile over the washboard, and when she stretched up from hitching the lines around the whip, the sun blazed right through.

For all the lack of silk hosiery, she had legs to match Ida's; and memories supplied the details he missed when she jumped lightly to the ground, giving an alluring quiver to curves that almost blossomed out of the well ventilated neck yoke. She was poised there, smiling at the world in general, and then she brushed her skirt down where it belonged.

"Oh, hello! Where's Cy?"

"Uh—where's Mr. Fife?"

"Dad's busy getting ready for a cattle drive. You helping Cy while he's studying law?"

"Ain't sure yet. Not till I ask your pappy if he can use a cow hand or a—uh—" He turned to the horse, and noted the way the bridle was wired together. "Uh—harness maker of something."

Cy came to the door. "Hello, Rosemary."

"Oh, look what I found, an expert saddler and harness maker, he wants to use rivets and wax ends instead of string and rawhide! Give me a sack of sugar and four sacks of beans and six sides of bacon—"

"You ain't taking to feeding the Injuns, are you?" Then, to Tanglefoot, "Quit gawking there, and start hustling out the vittles for Rosemary, I'm getting too old to lift heavy stuff."

Tanglefoot wanted the job. Rosemary was shapely and attractive, yet she did not have any of Ida's terrifying beauty, none of that perfection which left an awkward fellow numb and dazed and fumbling. And if she just did not laugh at him, he might get used to women; already, he began to see that Bird Cage Annie's cracked brain contained bits of sense.

He stumbled toward the front with a sack of beans. Trying to

listen to that thrilling voice made him swerve into a stack of galvanized buckets, and the whole tall column crashed down. He could have laughed it off, and added a bright quip, as the next stupidest man from Dry Prong would have done; but nearly twenty years of bungling had thinned Tanglefoot's tanned hide. He hated to go back into the store, so he spent minutes stowing the sack.

Cy croaked, "Y'ain't planting them beans, are you, Breck?"

And when he did come in for the rest of the supplies, he knocked a plug of chewing tobacco into the pickle barrel, and began carrying out sacks of rice instead of beans.

His ears became red and unnaturally sharp. Thus, when he finally began straightening out the tangle, and carrying the unwanted supplies back, to replace them with what Rosemary had ordered, he heard her low voiced remark, "Isn't he the funniest? Where did you find him?"

AFTER what he thought was hours, the wagon was finally loaded. Tanglefoot bolted for the back of the store and made a pretense of straightening out the confusion. The buckboard, however, did not roll away. Cy came clumping in, calling, "Breck! What in tunket you doing? Rosemary's waiting for you to ride back with her."

Tanglefoot shook his head. "I done changed my mind. I'd ruther help you, just for my grub. Then you can study for the law. No, sir, I never was worth a dime punching cattle, I'm a harness maker."

Cy went out again, and in a moment, the whip cracked; the wagon rattled away. When the proprietor returned, he said, "Breck, you ain't fooling me, you're just plumb bashful. Shucks, that gal won't bite you!"

Tanglefoot mopped his forehead. "She was mocking me."

"Hell's fire! She was laughing account something I said. Anyway, you'd not knocked so many things down, you'd not forgot that rice don't heft like beans if you'd not been so busy trying to look down the front of that there dress."

"Uh—I—wasn't neither."

Cy jabbed him in the ribs with his thumb. "Then you're a dadblame fool. If I was your age, I'd go after it. Getting her amused right off is a good sign."

"I ain't riding for the Diamond F!"

"All right, then grab a broom and start sweeping out, so I can study."

TWO days later, a trail herd was kicking up the dust. Bawling cattle skirted the town; high wheeled wagons followed. They were heading east, Lem Fife's herd, Tanglefoot told himself. And he was right.

Lem himself rode up, tall and sharp faced, with keen brown eyes; dust exaggerated his wrinkles, giving him a grim and relentless look. He stamped in, briskly, spurs jingling; his thumbs were hooked in his gun belt. One glance at Tanglefoot, and then he turned to the proprietor.

"Cy, I'm short handed. I want to borry your man for the drive."

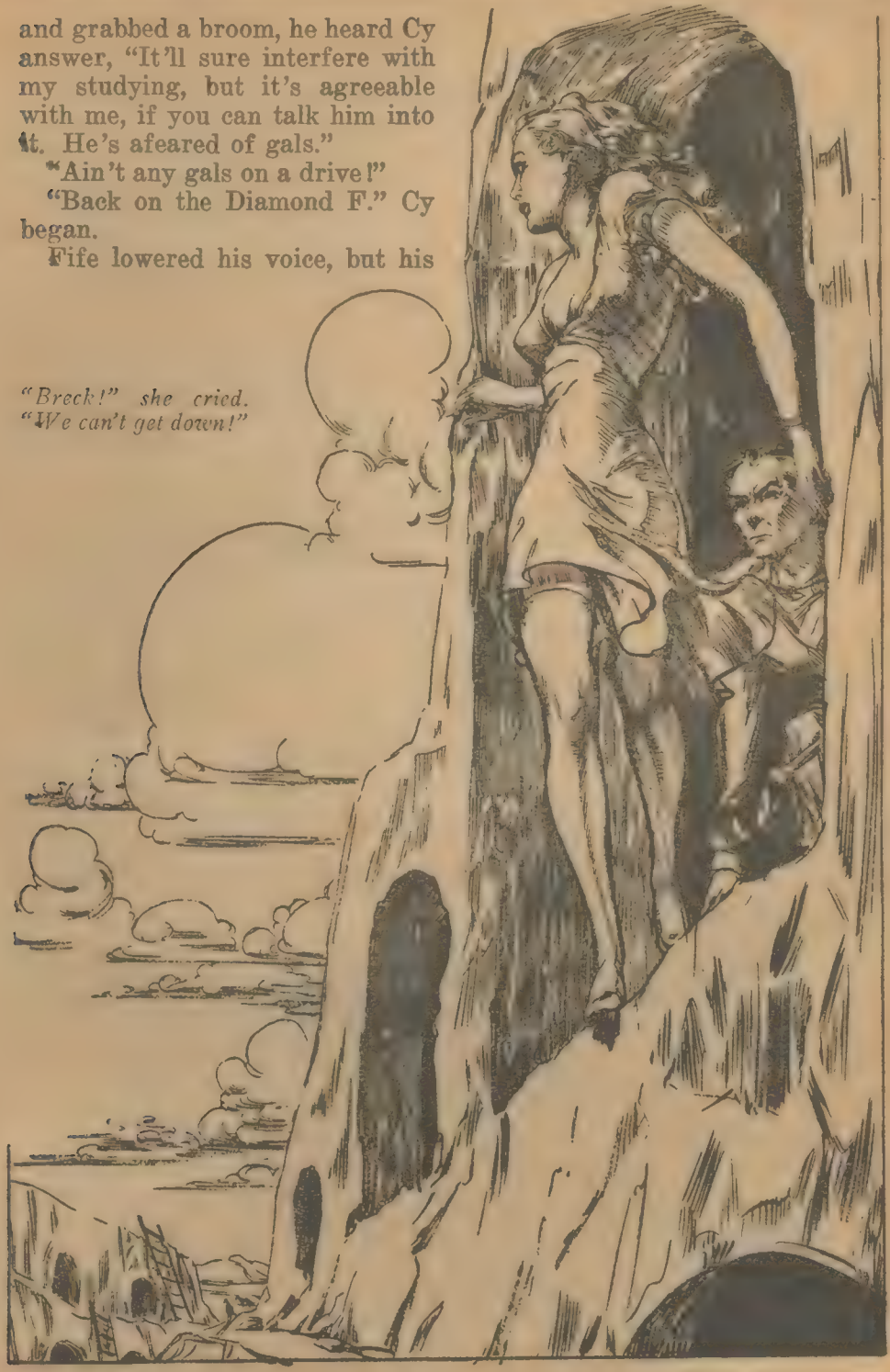
As Tanglefoot bolted to the rear

and grabbed a broom, he heard Cy answer, "It'll sure interfere with my studying, but it's agreeable with me, if you can talk him into it. He's afeared of gals."

"Ain't any gals on a drive!"

"Back on the Diamond F." Cy began.

Fife lowered his voice, but his



"Breck!" she cried. "We can't get down!"

whisper carried like the bawling of a bull. "That's just it. Ever since Rosemary's maw cashed in, I been run wild, keeping cowpunchers from getting familiar with that gal. That's why I am dead set on bashful ones." He raised his voice: "You, back there, you come out! You're riding with me, you hear?"

So Tanglefoot was hired. The way he reasoned it out, that was as good a way as any to get away from Dos Palos, where he had made such a bad start.

CHAPTER IV

Plan of Battle

THE Diamond F outfit had apparently been selected for having reached the age of discretion; they were grizzled, crusty, leathery, from the ramrod down to Buffalo Jack, the rheumatic cook who kept a .55-110 Sharps in the chuck wagon, a relic of his buffalo hunting days.

As the herd went east, a hot wind dried the cattle out. They were thirsty, and ready for anything. Fife rode up and down the bawling column, alert for a stampede; the cowpunchers became as short tempered as the critters, almost as quarrelsome as Buffalo Jack.

Fife grinned as he watched Tanglefoot picking up chips and tossing them into the cooney, beneath the wagon, where the fuel was carried. "If they weren't poking fun at you, they'd be shooting each other. You're doing all right, Breck."

About the time the herd was to be bedded down, a cowpuncher galloped up and said, "Lem, there's an outfit up there wants to cut the herd."

"Tell 'em to go to hell."

"But they claim they're reps for the X-Bar-X, looking for strays."

Fife cursed bitterly. "This is about the worst time and worst place those coyotes could have picked. Can't they wait till we get to Albuquerque? We're almost there. Tell 'em to come here and—"

"Looks like that's them coming now."

The man pointed. Fife looked at the riders who loomed up in the choking dust. They rode well apart. "Two of 'em. Zeke, tell the rest of the boys to be ready for a show."

Tanglefoot heard Fife hail the newcomers, and say, "We got no strays; there ain't a chance at all we picked any up."

"Makes no difference. Our job is to look and see. We got a right to."

There was just a chance that they had no such right, that they were not actually representatives of the outfit they named.

"Wait till morning. There's too much danger of a stampede."

The bearded stranger nodded. "That's just why there's no sense of your kicking up a fuss."

That mocking grin cracked Fife's remaining shred of temper. In a flash his gun was out, catching the two riders off guard. "Get out of my camp. And stay out."

They knew better than to try to draw. "We're coming back!" the bearded man countered. "And we'll come back a-shooting."

With that they left. Diamond F cowpunchers galloped into camp.

"What we going to do? Fight it out?" They had seen the end of the parley, and they knew without hearing the details. "You think they're reps?"

Fife shook his head. "My idea is, they're crooks looking for a chance to stampede us. Even if we did have a couple X-Bar-X critters, no honest outfit'd pull this on us. They ought to know damn' well one of them could ride along and get shipping receipts for any cows of his'n we put on the train."

"You ain't told us what to do!"

"If we shoot it out, they'll sure stampede, even if we won, we'd lose. If we let 'em cut the herd—"

"They'd still be a run, they'd see to that, the —s!"

Like most of his kind, Fife wanted to avoid gun play, the cutting down of his men in defense of his cattle. And men were often killed in stampedes. It was not a lack of courage that made Lem Fife hesitate to accept the bearded man's challenge; it was a sane and sensible weighing of the odds. Tanglefoot understood this as he watched the Diamond F men gathering about their boss. Buffalo Jack forgot to growl about the fuel supply and joined the council.

TANGLEFOOT watched the two men who galloped toward the camp from which they had come. There might be a line shack, up on the far off wooded ridge, where cowpunchers were stationed to check up on all trail herds that came through, but he shared Fife's doubts.

The two were rounding an isolated knoll, the only one which broke the flat expanse between the trail and the hills. Somehow, this reminded Tanglefoot of that clash back in Dry Prong. While Fife had proved himself quicker than the two ambassadors of theft, it would be otherwise when they returned in force. Though that flare of temper had caught them off guard, they would surely return shooting.

One glance at the conference, a few yards away, and Tanglefoot climbed into the chuck wagon. He saw a good use for the old Sharps .55-110. The bulky gun was a memento rather than a weapon, though there were half a dozen cartridges in the case.

No one noticed him mount up. All hands were concerned with plans for defense, and no one counted him in the reckoning. He was not sure but what they were right, for he had no definite scheme. His slow wits could not possibly have started clicking in so short a while. All Tanglefoot knew, as he galloped for the knoll, was that he felt light-headed, as he had that morning, before meeting Glenn Irwin.

Short of the crest, he dismounted. No wonder the cowpunchers mocked that Sharps. It weighed at least sixteen pounds, and the bullets carried well over an ounce of lead. But she was accurate.

Six riders were pouring out of the timber, quirting their broncs to a dead run. They were heading for the knoll, since it would conceal them until the last minute from the camp and the war council. They planned a dismaying rush, a moment of panic, nothing risked, and everything gained. Then one of

(Continued on page 84)

•• DON'T MIX

"I AIN'T havin' no part nor passel o' such locoed dumbness," grunted "Stumpy" Callan. "Me? I'm pullin' my share o' the dust out'n the cache an' high-tailin' to tuther parts 'fore the trails gits all gummed up with shootin' posses."

"Lank" Lavery surveyed his short partner through bloodshot, bleary eyes. He scratched a two weeks, all-black beard with fingernails that needed a scraper.

Yet there was a shrewd glint in his eyes that didn't jibe with their bloodshot condition or their bleariness.

"Hell's roosters, Stumpy," he

"My sister's comin' on that stage," he said, "and I'm gonna meet it, pertendin' I'm the sheriff."

LOVE and LAW

Stumpy wasn't riding herd on the sheriff's gal, even for a day. No, siree! Not with the richest creek claim in Nevada at stake! But even a stubborn man can change his mind . . .

By
LAURENCE
DONOVAN

said patiently. "I'm doin' yuh a favor. All I'm askin' is that yuh pleasure yourself ridin' herd on Sheriff Benn's gal for a day, whilst I'm persuadin' the law it'll be a heap to his advantage to be permittin' me to wear his star for jest twenty-four hours. No more, jest twenty-four hours, that's all."

"Nope, I ain't havin' none o' the same!" emphasized Stumpy who looked a foot broader than he was long. "Here we've put in weeks an' months convincin' this hell's half acre that we're bar bums and red-eye liquidators, all to keep the wolves off'n the richest creek claim in Nevady, an' yuh' honin' to run maverick on account of that letter from back East. Nope, I ain't—"

"Psst, Stumpy! There's Beulah Benn traipsin' down the other side o' the street! Maybe so yuh could be inducin' her she's too scrumptious to be traded off soul an' body so's her old man can hang onto his sheriffin' star. Think of it, Stumpy! You'd have her all to yourself all that day!"

Lank Lavery had called the turn when he termed Beulah Benn scrumptious. She had wind-free yellow hair. The town of Buzzard's Gap had never produced a more likely filly in all of its dubious, gunsmoked history.

Beulah Benn's nose tilted as if she disregarded the glances of downright admiration that went from one curving contour to another, each curve a bit more enticing than the others. She walked with a free and easy swaying of breath-taking hips above slim, lifting legs.

Of all the casual hombres who observed her passing to the general store, none was more disreputable than bearded, bleary-eyed Lank Lavery. No idling puncher, creek panner, or town hanger-on had more to disrecommend him than this same Lank, unless it might be his ragged, short partner Stumpy.

THEY were seated on kegs in the blazing sun. Above them was the very appropriate title, HANG-DOG SALOON.

Sheriff Benn's daugher disappeared into the store with a revealing flirt of her pink gingham skirt. Lank Lavery's teeth were even and white as he grinned at Stumpy.

"It'll be comin' on dark in a couple more hours," he said. "The gal allus takes an evenin' sashay on her pony up Fool's Gold creek. I'll be meetin' up with her a mile or so out, an' yuh come along an' see that she gits to the cabin in Old Forty an' stays put until nigh mornin'. Nary hombre but us knows that cabin."

Stumpy's small mouth worked over his inner misery.

"An' along comes Big Jake Pelter, the gamblin' man, an' the sole owner an' boss o' this hell's half acre, an' the best that'll happen to me will be to be drug by a lass rope until I'm plumb wore down to nothin'," moaned Stumpy. "Nope."

"You wantin' I should be meetin' up with my bride-to-be what I've been writin' nigh onto a year now, an' tellin' her I'm sheriffin' this Buzzard's Gap, only to have her heart busted by findin' I ain't never been nothin' but a creek panner, up an' until we hit that

gold pocket?" said Lank Lavery. "You wantin' I should be held up to contumaciousness an' disrespectability in the eyes of one which is comin' all alone an' unprotected from the far state of Saint Looiee to hitch up with the sheriff o' Buzzard's Gap? You wantin' that, Stumpy?"

"I ain't wantin' nothing but I should be gittin' my share o' the dust an' lightin' a shuck," persisted Stumpy. "Yuh're knowin' that the sheriff's gal is the same as bound an' branded to be hitched with Big Jake Pelter, an' if he's to tell a posse I'm to be drug at the heels of a bronk, then I'll be drug."

"I was thinkin'," said Lank Lavery thoughtfully. "Here we've worked our creek claim, an' we're richer than that feller Crowsis, an' we've drunk redeye an' acted like bums so's the town would think we was the same, an' now what would be more fitten than maybe so yuh should save the sheriff daughter from messalyin' herself with a crooked gamblin' man like Big Jake Pelter? That's what I've been thinkin'."

"Yuh quit thinkin' pronto, an' I'm ridin'," put out Stumpy, rolling to his feet.

AT THAT moment Sheriff Benn came out of the jailhouse and crossed toward the Hangdog Saloon for his hourly snifter. He had a walrus mustache that was brown and stained. He had small, shifty eyes. He was rightfully only the stepfather of Beulah Benn.

"I reckon his gal must-a got all her looks from her mother," said Lank Lavery. "Yuh see, Stumpy, if yuh herd 'er overnight in the creek cabin, maybe so yuh might take her mind off'n this Big Jake. An' by the time I'm finished pointin' out to Sheriff Benn he'd best let me wear his star for a day, or he mightn't be gittin' his gal back, or the poke o' dust I've laid out to salve his greasy conscience, 'tain't unlikely the gal might have cottoned to yuh, Stumpy, an'—"

"Whope!" barked Stumpy. "I'm high-tailin', an' now!"

Sheriff Benn had halted. He twisted his mustache and he fixed an unfriendly eye upon the disreputable partners.

"I'm warnin' yuh both for the last time to be makin' yourselves scarce around Buzzard's Gap," said Sheriff Benn. "Big Jake is layin' a complaint that both of you have been scalawaggin' in his place, acceptin' such drinks as are free, an' never havin' no dinero yourselves. The sooner yuh light a shuck out'n the county, the less trouble I'll be havin' to tote yuh the one meal per day as is allowed in my jail."

Lank Lavery grinned a little and joined Stump who was making for their dejected looking nags over by the watering trough. Beulah Benn tripped lightly out of the general store. She was looking into Lank Lavery's blurred eyes as he forked his saddle.

"Howdy, Miss Beulah!" greeted Lank blithely. "Nice evenin' for your ridin' up Fool's Gold Trail."

Stumpy muttered something like, "Gawd! If I hod your guts!" Beulah Benn's perky nose tilted at least half an inch. She said nothing whatever with meaningful scornfulness in her wide, blue eyes. Lank didn't mind, for his en-

tranced gaze at the moment was following the curving line of the girl's neck which disappeared none too quickly in the vee of her gingham dress at the throat.

Lank guessed there was a top button missing. He wished there had been two buttons gone.

Sheriff Benn was standing on the porch of the Hangdog Saloon. Lank's eyes cocked upon the lawman. He saw the flashily patterned vest of Big Jake Pelter come through the batwing doors.

"Twenty years older than the gal, an' fat as a greased steer," muttered Lank. "An' her old man's jest plain sellin' her out so's he can keep on wearin' the law badge, the same as which makes worse than no law at all in Buzzard's Gap."

Stumpy was pulling his mount around in the alkali dust. Lank sat there, taking in to the full a slightly different view of Beulah Benn as her slim legs carried her away from him with a toe lifting, tantalizing movement of her nicely swaying hips.

"Maybe it would have been better so if'n I hadn't took on this Abbie Turner o' Saint Looiee through that pichure in the marriage paper," muttered Lank. "But that was a year gone, an' tomorrow Abbie's arrivin' on the mornin' stage. Now if Stumpy—"

It must have been that Lank Lavery, slender and as tough as rawhide under his patched levis and torn wool shirt, was having maverick thoughts. Such thoughts as no hombre should have on the eve of a bride-to-be arriving, alone and unprotected, by stage coach all the way from Saint Looiee, which is in Missouri.

STUMPY CALLAN sat his horse uneasily, his black eyes fixed mournfully and fearfully upon the wagon trail along Fool's Gold creek. Down below him, in a patch of mesquite, was the motionless figure of his locoed pard, Lank Lavery.

Lank pulled a faded tintype from his shirt pocket. Its dimming luster did not add any to the charm of Miss Abbie Turner, on her way from Saint Looiee. Lank wished that he had not in a weak and lonesome moment indited misspelled but highly compromising missives to the Saint Looiee lady who was willing to be hitched permanent to Sheriff Lank Lavery of Buzzard's Gap.

It had seemed like a good recommendation for himself at the time. He and Stumpy had been grubbing out just about enough creek dust to pay for their fodder. Then they had hit the big pocket.

"Stumpy," the wise Lank had advised, "we will continue to be the same saddle bums we was when we hit Buzzard's Gap, an' work our claim on the sly. Tutherwise we'll have a claim jumpin' gold rush on our necks. We keep on drinkin' free redeye an' holdin' up our levis with nails instead of buttons for our galluses."

Came the wakening. Miss Abbie Turner had departed Saint Looiee without prior announcement to a letter by pony express, which had beaten the stagecoach by but two days. Tomorrow, Miss Abbie, in all her eastern finery, including a bustle of which Lank was suspi-

It was a ticklish moment. Only his arm saved the girl from going down.

cious as it showed in the tintype, was arriving in Buzzard's Gap.

"An' I'm meetin' her with a sheriff's star on my bosom, if I have to pers'nally take it off'n the lawman," had been Lank's boast.

Where he got dosed with loco weed, Stumpy never would know. Anyway, this dire plot had seemed to hatch full-grown in Lank's versatile brain. And when Lank hatched anything, it was bad.

Beulah Benn, the sheriff's scrumptious step-daughter, had come home from school a month before. Right pronto, Big Jake Pelter, gambling man and crooked boss of the town, had made it known that he had staked his claim.

Seeing that Sheriff Benn administered the law only when Big Jake crooked his finger, it was fitting that Sheriff Benn should smile upon this disposal of the fair and desirable offspring he had ac-

quired by marrying her now lamented mother.

So Lank Lavery's idea.

He wanted Sheriff Benn's badge for a day. He had enough washed gold to pay off Sheriff Benn, but he did not want that spread around until he had had his day with a sheriff's star.

Sheriff Benn's future depended upon his daughter being on hand to hitch up with Big Jake. To Lank's simple way of adding up two and two and making it a dozen or so, all he had to do was bluff Sheriff Benn by the temporary removal of his daughter.

"A poke o' dust an' deliverin' the gal back to her old man sound in wind an' limb will fix everything up," was Lank's argument to the highly skeptical Stumpy.

In all of Nevada, not another hombre would have followed Lank's line of reasoning. Stumpy didn't. He only followed Lank, and now he was losing faith in his partner by the minute.

THE setting sun brought out the yellow gold in the wind-free hair of the girl rider who came into view on the creek trail. Her paint pony was fiddle-footed. The girl kept his head high.

Lank was all set in the mesquite bushes. He reached forward and pinched his horse's nostrils just in time to choke off a whinny of greeting to the paint pony.

Then Lank's eyes were more entranced than they had been back in front of the general store. Evidently Beulah Benn wanted to enjoy to the full the slanted rays of the setting sun.

Her gingham skirt was well hiked up. Her black cotton stockings were rolled down below her knees. She couldn't possibly have expected an avid eye of the town of Buzzard Gap to ever see where her sweetly rounded thigh was being warmed by the gracious sun.

Likewise, Beulah's yellow hair was tossed back. Her gingham waist was so opened as to make sure that the mounded fullness of her bosom missed none of the sunshine. Lank Lavery gritted his white teeth and put his mind back upon the lawless act he was about to commit against the great state of Nevada.

He had to keep thinking that he was taking this great risk for the little woman now in the stagecoach somewhere in the nearby rolling hills, Miss Abbie Turner. But it was an effort.

The carelessly riding girl had no hint of lurking danger. Not until a big sorrel horse plunged out of the mesquite bushes. Lank had some vague idea of doing this quietly. Perhaps he could present his case, his dire need of the sheriff's star for a day, and his noble purpose, and win Beulah Benn to peaceable submission.

The sudden lunge of his sorrel sent all of his somewhat locoed ideas flying hell west and crooked. Miss Beulah Benn took one look at the descending rider, attempted to rein her pony around, and emitted a scream that must have been heard in Buzzard's Gap more than a mile away.

Lank couldn't have that. He was compelled to crash his sorrel into the smaller paint pony. And

the pinto squealed, reared and started over backward.

It was a ticklish moment. Only Lank's encircling rawhide arm saved the girl from being thrown, with the possibility of her pony's weight crushing her. The moment immediately became more ticklish.

For there was Lank, with the soft and lovely moulded figure of the sheriff's daughter held in his arm. Her wind-free hair was in his eyes. His horse was jolted by the collision, and decided it was an auspicious moment to clamp his teeth upon the bit and run like hell.

Seeing this disastrous beginning of what might end in catastrophe that must rate at least being "drug at the heels of a bronk," Stumpy Callan performed what for him was an amazing feat in mental attainment. He then and there solemnly dissolved partnership with Lank Lavery and all of his maverick ways.

"If any spooked son is gonna get hisself drug by a bronk, it ain't gonna be me," muttered Stumpy, jabbing the steel into his horse's ribs.

He high-tailed just in time to see Beulah Benn's pinto pony scramble to its feet and break back down the trail toward Buzzard's Gap. Whereupon Stumpy abandoned even the idea of collecting his share of the gold cached in the creek cabin.

LANK LAVERY thought he never would get Beulah's yellow hair out of his eyes. His sorrel had his ears back and gave no heed to the strange carryings-on with which he was running away.

Lank's bearded chin first was tight upon the girl's soft throat as he tried to prevent her slipping from his arm, then his chin was much more delightfully buried for a few brief seconds.

He hitched the girl's rounded figure across one hard leg, easing his position in the saddle. With his one hand he attempted to regain control of the runaway sorrel. A glance showed him that Beulah Benn's eyes had closed, and her body was close and warm before he got the bit back from the running horse.

The girl's lips were slightly parted. Her oval face was brown and warm, and the long lashes of her eyes were darker on her cheeks than her hair.

Along about this time, Lank began to think. What if the girl was hurt and died on his hands? Her pony had started home? He had to do something about this, and pronto. And where was Stumpy?

He reined in the sorrel and listened. No Stumpy. The girl sighed deeply. He tried to take his fascinated eyes off the pulse in her throat and the more wonderfully white space over her heart.

Then he managed something he never would have believed he could. He pulled her gingham waist together and was able to hook one of three loose buttons.

Where was Stumpy? A chickadee chirped in the trail behind him. No sound of hooves disturbed it.

"The yeller backboned—"

He shut up, because the girl's blue eyes opened wonderingly. If

Lank had been more attentive, he might have noticed that they had not been very tightly closed. Lank juggled words in his throat but could not disentangle them.

The girl's blue eyes were like nothing Lank had ever seen before. He cringed inside, expecting her curved, red lips to begin words that would describe the kind of a low-down sidewinder she thought him to be.

Lank did not believe his own ears when she spoke softly, like she was awakening from some kind of a dream.

"You're brave," she murmured. "I'd have been killed when Painter bolted, if you hadn't saved me. I want to thank you."

Lank was sure he would choke to death. When her small, sun-brown hands clasped at the back of his neck, and her parted lips were sweet and clinging upon his bearded mouth, his spooked heart turned over twice then stopped completely, or he thought it did.

Before the girl's moist lips had completed her mistaken thanks, if it was mistaken, Lank Lavery knew that he was a gone gosling.

"Yes'm, it was lucky I happened along," he muttered when he could work his awkward tongue. "Maybe so, it'd be best if we'd ride on up to my shack an' catch up my pard's hoss for you to ride back."

She had eased herself into a more comfortable position in Lank's arm. The compelling softness crushed to his sweated shirt wasn't the least like the skinny contour of Miss Abbie Turner as revealed on that faded tintype.

"Yes, oh yes, Lank Lavery," the girl said in a low voice. "It's comin' on dark, an' I'm afraid—I'm afraid—"

Her words murmured away. Her eyes closed again. Her hands fell away from Lank's neck.

Lank Lavery's understanding of women critters wasn't worth two hoots in Hades at this moment. He was downright spooked as the girl lay limply in his arms.

Lank's opinion of Stumpy Callan changed swiftly as he lifted Beulah and carried her into the small cabin. As far as he was concerned, it was all right with him if Stumpy kept on high-tailing it to hell and gone.

WHAT he did next was not on Lank's program. Beulah Benn appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Anyway she was breathing, although Lank's best efforts had not seemed to do much toward restoring her to consciousness.

His idea of holding up Sheriff Benn for his star vanished. He guessed he'd best leave this as it lay, and return the girl to Buzzard's Gap pronto.

There wasn't much chance of a sudden posse coming upon the hidden and unsuspected cabin, but Lank misdoubted what might happen if he rode into searchers from the town. Anyway, he decided it would be a good idea to shave and clean up a mite.

He tried to keep his eyes away from Beulah Benn as he changed into newer duds and slicked back his hair. And when he turned toward her, she again had apparently returned to consciousness.

"I know you didn't save me," she said. "But I wish it had been that way."

Her blue eyes stared at him innocently.

"Yuh-yuh a'right?" gulped Lank. "Reckon I'll have to be ridin' yuh back double. My pard ain't showed up—"

"You're the best lookin' hombre around Buzzard's Gap, now that I can see all of your face," was the girl's amazing speech. "I'm not going back to town, not tonight, Lank Lavery. I'm glad you saved me, an' that my pony bolted."

Lank swallowed hard. This was made to order. It fitted in with his original plan. He tried to keep his

eyes away from the enticing rounds of the girl's bosom that arose and fell with her steady breathing.

"Not goin' back?" he said thickly. "But yuh can't—I mean yuh can't stay all night—I mean—"

She lifted herself on one elbow and held out her hand.

"Quit evading, Lank Lavery," she said softly. "My pony didn't bolt. I know you didn't save me, but I wish it had been that way—well, maybe so I do, and maybe so I don't—you like me, don't you, Lank, or you wouldn't have looped me in the way you did?"

"I didn't—I mean I didn't know what—how you'd be," floundered Lank. "I was meanin' only to git your dad's sheriff star for a day, 'cause I'm meetin' the stage tomorrow. I figgered if your dad knowed I had yuh up here, he'd be willin' to talk turkey."

"Why, Lank Lavery!" exclaimed the girl. "You mean it ain't me you're wantin'? I was thinkin'—"

She suddenly buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders were shaking. She extended one shapely leg as if to arise from the bunk.

Lank wasn't sure how he got beside her, or how he came to be holding her in his arms and patting her shoulder at the same time. When she lifted her tear-stained face, Lank was sure she was prettier than any angel.

"Lank, honey," she whispered. "Please—if you want me, I don't care. Because if you—if we—well, I'd die if I had to marry Big Jake Pelter, an' I'll do anything—anything—"

There it was. And there was her uplifted mouth, curved and soft, and the tears were brimming in her big eyes, and her arms went around Lank's neck so tight that he felt strangled.

But that choked sensation passed as her lips parted and clung to his mouth, and her soft body trembled closer to him. Her shapely, enticing leg was no longer seeking the floor.

Never had such a storm swept through Lank Lavery, chilling and burning all at the same time.

Beulah was tightening her arms around his neck as Lank's hands touched the yielding smoothness of her back.

She was sighing happily—

HOW long it was after that Lank did not know, that Beulah spoke. Her voice was only a low, husky murmur, but the words were distinct.

"Lank, honey, Big Jake wouldn't take me now, would he?"

"Not unless he melts off the hinges of hell trying it," said Lank.

"An' if you don't figure on being married right away, honey, it's all right," she said. "You brought me here because you want my dad's star, Lank. You said you wanted it to meet the stage. Why, honey?"

Lank never built or threw a faster loop than right then.

" 'Cause my sister's comin' on that stage," he said. "An' I've been writin' her how I'm sheriff of Buzzard's Gap."

"Maybe so, honey, your sister won't take a shine to me," said Beulah doubtfully. " 'Specially if she finds out about tonight."

"My sister ain't nowise lingerin'

around Buzzard's Gap," stated Lank firmly. "She's only stoppin' over a few hours on the way to Silver City. That's why I can sure 'nough use your dad's star."

"Lank, honey!"

"Yeah, sweetheart."

"Benn's my step-dad an' I only took his name, so's anything he says about me stayin' with you, hitched or otherwise, don't make any difference. An' he's always likkered up at this time of night. He keeps his star on his vest in the office."

"That'll be hunky," said Lank, but he didn't feel that way.

His bounden duty to Miss Abbie Turner, late of Saint Looiee, weighed upon his conscience. After all these years without nary woman critter, things had sure enough taken a turn very much for the worse.

"If Stumpy Callan should come ridin' don't be tellin' him nothin', sweetheart," directed Lank just as he was leaving. "And don't be taken with any sudden notion he was the one who looped yuh off'n your pony."

"I'll be waitin' right here, honey. Kiss me."

His start was delayed another twenty minutes.

SHERIFF BENN was not just likkered up on redeye. He was soggy. Lank Lavery said, "I've got your gal, sheriff. An' here's a poke o' dust that'll run five hundred. I'm wantin' to borry your star for a few hours."

Lank was suspicious. Sheriff Benn clutched at the sack of washings, pouring it out on the table.

"Yuh be gittin' that gal o' mine back here come noon tomorrow," was all he said about that, and Lank wanted to plant one on his ugly chin. "An' yuh say you're ridin' to meet the stage 'cause of a sister or suthin'?"

"Sure," lied Lank. "Jest passin' through, an' she thinks I'm the sheriff."

Sheriff Benn's little eyes half closed. He went over and looked across the street at the Hangdog Saloon.

"Yuh keep out o' Big Jake Pelter's way with that badge," he said. "An' I'd be advisin' yuh meet the stage at daylight where it fords Fool's Gold creek. Don't yuh be startin' no ruckus with that star, but if yuh should run into any owlhooters, you'd best be totin' irons, which yuh ain't got."

Lank was outside, riding, before he began conning over the ease with which he had snagged the sheriff's star. Plainly the lawman wasn't worrin' about the goings-on of his fair step-daughter.

It appeared that Beulah Benn's paint pony had not come back into town or had missed being noticed. Lank gave some thought to the perfidy of his partner Stumpy.

"The yeller bellied galoot," he complained. "How-some-ever, it was kind-a propitious, him not bein' around. I reckon I'll do the lookin' after Beulah Benn from here out."

A discomforting thought struck him.

"But supposin' Stumpy goes moseyin' back to the cabin while I'm gone?" he muttered. "Well,

(Continued on page 74)

GIRLS WITH GUNS

By TOM WADE

She was throwing a wide loop on the range, running high, wide, and handsome. All she needed was a man who could tame her and put his brand on her wildness . . .

AT FIRST, with the moon obscured by a low cloud, Curt Disney thought it was a young, white skinned boy who had stripped off his clothes and was wetting himself down from a horse wranglers' water bucket he had brought out onto the open range.

Somewhere near a herd was being bunched, or being moved. From the ledge on High Trail, up the mountainside where he was hidden, Curt could hear the sounds of beef milling, the thud of pony hoofs, and the faint rumble of herd riders' voices. He figured that the boy belonged to the herd outfit and chuckled to himself.

"A sure 'nough bashful calf, bringing his bucket so far away so the cowpokes won't see him slicking up!"

Just then the range moon slid out from its veil of cloud and Curt jumped. Under his breath he exclaimed, "I'm a coyote's pup if it's not a girl!"

His astonishment robbed him of all sense of peeping while he watched the scene below. Hers was a slender figure, with ivory-tinted skin that gleamed in the silvery moonlight.

Even now where he was, Curt could imagine how the girl's vigorous rubbing with her towel would be bringing a pink glow to her ivory skin. He watched her get partly dressed, then turned away with a sigh, but sharply turned back and froze, his hand on his holster.

A SHADOW moved on the sage floor of the valley below, a shadow that was slipping silently out from a mesquite clump half a rope's length behind the bather. Curt waited, tensed, holding back a cry of warning. He was on a strange range and the herd that was moving through the night might very well be a rustlers' drift. It might not be any too healthy for a stranger to be caught in the neighborhood while crooked ropes were throwing, and he had other reasons for keeping hidden.

He waited too long. For the girl heard the scrape of a foot fall and swung around without a sound.

He pinioned her arms, knocking the gun down.
"I'm puttin' a brand of my own on you!"

The man to whom the shadow belonged sprang for her.

Curt's gun flashed out but he did not dare thumb the hammer. The girl's body was a white silhouette against the black bulk of her attacker.

Curt put his cautions aside and bounded down the trail. For a moment he lost sight of the scene and when he came into view of the struggle again he pulled up with new amazement.

The girl was fighting like a little tigress. The man's arms were a black circle around her waist but before Curt could reach her she had torn herself free and her fingers were clawing in a wild frenzy at her assailant's face and her fists were beating at him furiously. Through breath hot with rage she cried out. "For touching me I'll kill you, Blackie, like the slinking coyote you are!"

Curt was within arms' reach of the pair, his fists ready, when the girl leaped backward with a cat's suddenness and bent over the pile she'd made of her clothing. Her attacker shouted a vile oath and sprang for her but she came up shooting, a gun in either hand.

Two explosions thundered through the night at the same second. The man she had called "Blackie," whirled and crumpled at Curt's feet. With a hissing sound from between her teeth the girl leaped to stand over the writhing figure on the ground. Her guns spoke again and again while she poured her lead into the body at her bare feet.

Curt shouted at her and she appeared to be aware of him for the first time. She swung about to face him, her moon clad body crouched, her smoking guns leveled at the newcomer.

"I've made a sieve out of one man who tried to touch me," she said between tight lips, her voice shaking with still unspent fury. "I'll do the same to you."

"You'd sure be making a mistake, lady," Curt warned her. He stood still. Any kind of move might have started those white triggered fingers to twitching. The girl's eyes, gray in the moonlight, were hard. Her red mouth, scarlet as a hibiscus flower, was set firm. She remembered suddenly that the moonlight was almost her only raiment.

Still keeping Curt covered she looked about for the towel her attacker had snatched from her. It was lost in the sage. She stooped to bring up a handful of her clothes and held them in front of her.

"Talk quick, mister," she snapped. "How long you been watching me?"

"You got no call to be asking me that, ma'am," Curt returned, brusquely. "I got more call to be asking you what we're going to do about this hombre on the ground."

She kicked the body contemptuously with her bare toes, her white legs flashing free from the scanty protection of the clothes bunched against her.

"There's enough of his breed on the range to give him a dirt bed that'll hide him. I'll not be asking your help. I handle my own skunks."

ABRUPTLY the sound of galloping hoofs came close from

across the range where the unseen herd was moving. Riders were coming up to investigate the fusillade of shots that had ripped through the night. The girl waved Curt around so that he would not be behind her while she faced the direction from which the riders were coming. She crouched, hugged her bunch of clothes tighter, and waited until the lead riders came thundering up, their mustangs rearing to an air clawing stop. The lead rider, a dark faced bulk with a livid scar across one cheek recognized the girl and Curt could sense the gleam in his beady eyes when he ran them over bare thighs and hips.

"Damned if it ain't the Hell-Cat," he grunted. "Who you been shootin' now and who you got with you?"

The girl's voice was harsh. "Get back, the pack of you. I'll shoot down any white-livered blackleg who stops to take another look at me the way I am. And I'll take care of who's with me."

There was a surly mutter from saddle to saddle. One voice complained. "We got a right to know who's that on the ground, iffen he belonged to us."

The girl's answer to that was a belch of fire. Her slug swept the lead rider's sombrero from his head. His hand reached for his own iron but the girl's gun was steady and pointing. He whirled his pony and the cursing riders swept back across the range.

The girl swung back upon Curt. "Turn around and stand mighty still, mister. I'll let you know when I'm dressed."

Curt turned around. Over his shoulder he said, "If you don't need me, ma'am, and seems like you don't, I'll be riding on. My horse is up on High Trail."

The girl was dressed in the passing of a minute. Curt was walking back to the foot of the trail, ignoring her commands not to move. She called to him sharply. When he turned, he saw that she was in a boy's corduroy trousers which were tucked into boots. She hadn't taken time to fasten her shirt together. On either side of her open collar the inner halves of her cup-like breasts peeped forth boldly. The moon laid mysterious shadows in the enticing valley they formed. She slapped at her boots with her quirt impatiently.

"You haven't told me what you were doing on this range at night. There's no welcome here for strangers on the prowl. If you are a spy watching my herd, I'll have a dirt bed laid out for you same as this other maverick. You heard what they called me."

CURT lost his temper. It didn't seem right to be taking that kind of talk from a woman. Specially after he'd put himself in danger of unseen guns by coming out of his hiding place to help her.

"I ain't saying whether I was spying or not, ma'am. I'm mentioning, though, that it's only crooked beef that needs to be spied on. If you are expecting spies, that brands your herd. And I heard what they called you. Seems like they called you pretty straight."

The girl took a step toward him, her eyes blazing. Her leather quirt whistled through the air. She brought it down with a cruel

crunch across the side of his face.

Curt looked at her steadily for a full minute. Her eyes met his evenly.

He wondered what had turned her into a bandit, for he was pretty sure she was a range free-booter. Her herd was too suspicious. And his one glimpse of the riders her shots had attracted stamped them as just what she called them, coyotes and blacklegs. Gunmen every one, before they were cowpokes, half breeds mostly.

Suddenly he caught her wrists and held them against her furious tearing and jerking with a grip of steel.

"I'm putting a brand of my own on you, ma'am, just for that kiss with your cow whip. You sure got it coming."

He jerked her close and still prisoning her wrists mashed his hard lips against her soft ones. She kicked his shins viciously, tried to bite his face, and let loose a hell-cat's tirade.

"Sure as there's a hell for snakes to crawl into I'll send you there! I'll shoot you down and tear your eyes out with my fingers."

For answer to that Curt pulled her close to him again, jerking her wrists behind him so that her straight young body was flung against his, her breasts warm through his cambray shirt. "I'll be riding off your range now, ma'am," he grunted. "If you do any shooting, you'll be plugging me in the back, which maybe is a hell-cat's way. And if you lift that quirt again, I'll lay it on your own back so you'll be wearing the marks till next roundup!"

He turned to get his horse from the trail. Her hands flew to her guns, then wavered and lifted the quirt while she took a step following him. The whip poised in the air, then slowly came down to her side. As if she was amazed at herself, she frowned while she watched him blend into the night.

IN the single street of Loose End, where a row of frame buildings, clustered at the end of High Trail, only two lights shone when Curt rode in from the range. One was a pale yellow flare over the livery and feed stable; the other a yellow panel spewed through the open doors of Blinky Mack's Dance Saloon and Faro Emporium. Curt decided to drop in at the saloon before bedding down. The business he had in the Las Palomas country might as well get started.

Inside was the kind of crowd Curt might expect to find. A group clustered about the faro table, cow punchers in chaps and range shirts with that same look of being gunmen as had the herd riders on the range. Gamblers and horse wranglers and one group about a drinking table that Curt took to be ranchers.

One of these was a big man with beefy hands and a square jaw, almost dandily dressed in broadcloth coat and flowing cravat, but with a look about him of evil importance. The others who were at the table and had stopped their conversation to stare at Curt when he walked in, were of the same stamp.

From behind the bar Blinky Mack eyed the stranger with surly suspicion. When Curt dropped a

coin on the bar, Blinky Mack looked at his fingers.

"Them's gun fingers, mister," Blinky Mack said gruffly. "I ain't seen them hereabouts afore."

"That ain't saying," Curt returned, "that they won't be right familiar from now on."

The proprietor blinked at him through gopher eyes. "Talk ain't cheap 'round here, stranger. Sometimes it cost a lot, sudden-like."

"My mouth never opens first," Curt snapped. "But maybe you'll talk long enough to tell me how to head out from town for the Bar-Y spread. I'm hitting for it early in the morning."

Down the bar a dance hall girl put her glass down and turned around. Over at the table where

She whirled on him, clawing, scratching, and slapped him back.

the three ranchers sat the silence thickened while all three faces were turned to Curt. The big man half rose from his chair, then settled back when another of the glum trio touched his arm. The dance girl slid along the bar, swaying her full curved hips under a thin skirt slit up the side to show flashes of lush white thighs when she walked.

"You better talk to me, mister, instead of asking the way to the Bar-Y. It'll be more healthy, not to say entertainin'."

CURT glanced at the pert breasts that overflowed her low cut bodice. She smirked at him and the two mounds quivered as she swung her body, but he turned away. He remembered that white, moon-dressed body out on the range, firm-fleshed, straight and with youthful contours that, he would swear, had never been a dance hall's treasures.

Blinky Mack still was eyeing him with an ominous stare. "Maybe you'll be tellin' me, Mister Gun Fingers, what's callin' you to take the trail to the Bar-Y? There's them in this room as would be mighty downright interested in knowin'."

Curt saw that his glance flicked the three ranchers at the table, particularly the big fellow. "I'll give you a civil answer to that," Curt said sharply. "Though I'm not saying it won't be the last time I'm civil unless you'll point the way. I'm looking for a young woman, name of Jane Ladlaw. On a matter that's private. I been told she bosses the Bar-Y."

The big fellow at the table got up despite a tugging hand that would have held him back from interfering at the bar. Curt saw him coming in the back bar mirror. He saw, too, that the big fellow's thumb was hooked in a vest pocket, hanging his hand close to the bulge of a belt-hung holster.

"She ain't expectin' them gun fingers by any chance, is she, stranger?"

Curt looked at the big fellow straight. "You got a call to know that, mister?"

The hand near the hidden holster moved slightly. Carelessly Curt's hand dropped to his own thigh-holstered iron. It was Blinky Mack who answered Curt's question. "You're talkin' to Newt Krang, mister, as who owns the Circle Cross spread next south and adjoinin' of the Bar-Y. The other gents are his brothers and partners. Newt Krang's got a call to know what he wants to know."

Curt wasn't telling him, nevertheless, whether Jane Ladlaw of the Bar-Y was expecting him. One of the men at the table came over to the bar and urged the big rancher away. While they crossed the floor, they held a whispered conversation that Curt could see had to do with his guns and his "gun fingers." Some signal passed from them to Blinky Mack.

The proprietor attempted sudden geniality.

"It ain't easy for a stranger to find the Bar-Y trail," he said, shoving across a drink on the house. "You might get lost before you find this here Jane Ladlaw. You drop in here in the morning, early as you favor, and I'll send along a guide to set you right."

The dance girl sidled closer. She lifted a foot to the bar rail so that her short skirt fell away from her bare thigh. "You come with me, mister. Morning will come before you know it. Then you'll be right here."

Another time Curt wouldn't have scoffed at her well rounded charms. He'd been riding down almost to the Border clear from Wyoming. He hadn't given much thought to women along the way. But he couldn't help comparing the girl with what had just faced him on the range. He shook his head.

And he knew instinctively that if he accepted Blinky Mack's guide in the morning there would be others waiting ahead and he'd ride straight into an ambush. He knew Newt Krang. Krang was part of his business with Jane Ladlaw and the Bar-Y.

MATT LADLAW, Jane's father, had saved his life in Wyoming. Matt was the real owner of the Bar-Y but Newt Krang, who wanted the spread because of its water, had tried every way he knew to get the Bar-Y away from him. Matt Ladlaw had defied him, powerful as Krang was, and Krang, with the county sheriff's crooked help, had trumped up a rustling charge and driven Matt Ladlaw from the country. Krang's gunmen ruled the range in those days.

Matt Ladlaw's daughter had stayed behind, determined to save the spread until it was safe for her father to come back. Now, though she didn't know it yet, Matt Ladlaw was dead and the man who owed him his life had come to find Jane Ladlaw and give her, if she needed it, the help of his guns.

He wasn't taking assistance on his way from Newt Krang's renegades, some of whom he knew were in the saloon studying him. If they still were after the Bar-Y, they wouldn't want his guns on the spread.

While he was untying the bridle reins at the hitching rack, that flanked one side of the long building of the dance hall, the low sobbing of a woman came to his ears. He located the sound farther along the building, deep in the shadows. A girl leaned against the wall, weeping into her fingers. The silk dress she wore, fitted to caress the sweep of her legs, the tapering of her thighs and rounded hillocks of her bosom, had been almost torn from her. It was ripped down half way to her waist, revealing the upper slopes of firm breasts held by only the sheerest of narrow lace. When Curt approached her, she shied off deeper into the shadows, and looked wildly around.

"If they find you talking to me, they'll kill you," she whispered through her tears. "They didn't dare kill you inside. But they would out here, and I'd be beaten again."

"Beaten because of me?" Curt exclaimed. "I never even saw you before."

"They'd beat me for talking to any man. Specially any one connected with Bar-Y. I saw you through the window and I could hear you. The bar's on this side."

Curt could see that she was pretty, young and fresh. Below her

(Continued on page 95)

MEXICAN MISSION

By L. B. D'ARCY

"DOC" REAGAN was making ready to light a shuck out of this Mex dive when he first saw the gal. He instantly opined she was strayin' wide from the home range. Her neat skirt was long and it rustled crisply. Her white waist hadn't been low-cut, but she had turned it in at the top buttons. The exposed V was a warm, lovely brown, but that was range tan. She was anything but a Mex. She was American—white.

Doc Reagan muttered an oath under his breath when he saw the way she looked up provocatively at the gay caballero with her. A greaser, that one, with too much of a grin showing teeth that were too white. Doc's knuckles itched, although he didn't lift his head from his arms. He had been trailing this same caballero for more than a solid week now.

"Diablo" Morez, the caballero was called. His gorgeous duds, including the black sombrero with the solid gold conchas went with his name. For Doc had learned he was the famed toreador or maybe it was matador. To Doc he was just another beef sticker, and that didn't rate higher with Doc than a sticker of pigs, or any other butcher.

The gal's face was flushed. She laughed a little too loudly and tossed her small, golden-crowned head. But her laugh grated on Doc Reagan's raw nerves. A steady diet of mescal for the past few days had made him proddy.

"Yo' can't never figger the critters," grated Doc under his breath. "She ain't no more shame to her than that plain, ornery Dolores over there."

He didn't mean Dolores was plain. She couldn't be that and seductive at the same time, and she was *muy bueno* when it came to the latter. She was the prettiest one of the dancing girls. Her face wasn't as hard as the others, and her liquid dark eyes had a yearning sympathy for a lonely cowpuncher, very obviously on the prod and pied up on distilled cactus juice. She had even come over and slipped a goldpiece into his hand.

So even if Dolores wasn't earning her grub altogether like a lady, she wasn't the kind of a Mex senorita to take all a waddy's *dinero*, then forget him while the watchful rurales came and toted

She wasn't the kind of girl to take all a waddy's dinero and then forget him when the going got tough. And when he was on the verge of being roped in by the law south of the Rio, she stuck by him

When they broke in, they found Nora neatly roped.

him out. And Doc Reagan was apparently verging upon the stage of being roped and calaboosed by the funny law of Quinta, here south of the Rio below Laredo.

DOC'S bloodshot eyes swung back to the American girl, trying to make his cactus juiced brain remember where he had seen her oval face, that gold yellow hair and her wide blue eyes. If he had met her in riding duds up on the Nueces River range of Southwest Texas, he'd have read the brand of "Old Bucko" Harnes in her straight little nose, her generous mouth and the resolute chin.

"The number thees time ees fourteen," droned the mestizo running the game wheel, and Doc saw him rake in some more of the American gal's *dinero*. And when the wheel spun again, Diablo Morez had displayed his white teeth even more, touched her arm, and covered a number with his own chips.

So that was the way of this gal, and that didn't fit in with a daughter of Bucko Harnes. Doc Reagan recalled that old Bucko had a pair of young fillies, like this one, but neither of them would be in this hell-hole. Not with her waist tucked into a V, and the rustly skirt deliberately pulled up to display shapely, silk covered ankles as she sat on the game table stool.

Doc had passed back the gold piece to the flaming Dolores, even if he reckoned that was a mistake, seeing that he had become about as disreputable in appearance as some dirty sheepherder, what with a week of mescal. Even his walnut-butted six-guns had passed to a bartender in exchange for more cactus juice. That had been a part of his deliberate play.

If any of Doc Reagan's fellow rangers had seen him now, they would have cussed the lucky sonuvagun for the maverick time he was having, and for the gals like Dolores. But they would have opined that some day would be that day for Doc Reagan when his widely reputed luck would fail him over here among the hot tamales.

Doc had to make his play high and wide, but easy like. He didn't dare wear his ranger badge outwardly or next to his hide. For here he was on his own. If the Mex rurales rounded him up, he would have to get out of the loop the best way he could. He would not even be acknowledged by his own ranger outfit.

The business that had brought him was a little matter of Mex beef that somehow must be swimming the Rio and getting mixed up with inspected herds on the other side. Doc Reagan had been quick to discover that this Diablo Morez was the ramrod who bossed Quinta, stuck wornout bulls in the heart, and still managed to have a herd of his own on the brown starvation range below the Rio.

Until the American girl with the provocative red lips, and the nice V in her bodice, and the scrumptious knees had drifted in with this Morez, Doc had been the only American in the place. And until he had seen the pert little filly and begun to sense something wrong about the way she was wasting her *dinero*, and the way she laughed, and the way she choked over mescal, and the too obvious

way she displayed her beauty, Doc had been having ideas about the sympathetic Dolores.

Even a drunk cowpuncher didn't take Mex lovelies across the Rio, but Doc had been considering the matter. It was wrong—a girl not having a chance, when she'd grubstake a wandering waddy who had barely been good to her. But the matter of Dolores suddenly passed from Doc's mind.

THE croupier at the game wheel and several other jabbering greasers were having an argument. Morez, the gay toreador, was putting an arm about the American girl and drawing her away from the table. Doc didn't like it a bit the way Morez looped her soft curves into his arms doing a sudden pivot. But it wasn't his business.

The ruckus was all Mex talk, but Doc savvied it. The maddest greaser was a fellow who had stepped back from the table, and he was confronting Diablo Morez.

Doc heard him say, "You take my herd! You take my Chiquita!"

It was all in Mex. And Morez curled his lip and replied in about the same anger.

"Pig!" was what he said. "To come here!"

Doc almost forgot his role as the flashing gleam of a knife showed. The Mex accosting Morez was flipping it back for a lighting quick throw. Watching that, Doc couldn't be sure where the small calibred gun had come from that made the spiteful double crack, like two dry sticks.

The knife wielder did let go of the sticker, but it slammed down and stuck in the game table. A big Mex with a shawl over his shoulders had apparently been asleep at the table alongside Doc. But this shawled hombre was rearing to his feet now, and he had a wicked derringer pulled from under the shawl.

"Damn yo', drop it!" rapped out Doc Reagan, forgetting he was supposed to be asleep. He had seen that the Mex, probably planted there, was more likely to lead poison the American girl than Diablo Morez, seeing Morez had managed to keep her all wrapped up with his arms and legs.

The Mex snarled at Doc, but the next second he let out a belly squawk. Doc put what the Mex call a *boca de osa,* the grip of the bear, upon his greasy wrist, and Doc bore down upon it. The bone snapped and the derringer got into Doc's hand.

The fellow who had dropped his knife, also dropped himself, blood from his bullet-slit throat making a red line across the black cloth of the game table. And it was then Doc saw the smoking little revolver in the hand of the American filly.

The girl had been putting on plenty of show the minute before. But her blue eyes were wide with fear now. She was staring at the gun as if she had never seen it before. Doc got the loco idea that she never had. And from the looks of understanding between Diablo Morez, the croupier mestizo and a few other hombres, Doc had the quick savvy that some crooked kind of a ranny was being run.

THE gunning had been self defense all over the face of it. The Mex who had yielded the derringer

might have been intending to lead poison Diablo Morez, or it might have been meant for the other fellow if the gun in the girl's hand hadn't got him. And Doc was swearing under his breath.

He couldn't be sure that the girl hadn't fired that death bullet, and yet her face held too much fear and surprise. Doc teetotally forgot that a drunk waddy from over the border hasn't any business honin' for a ruckus among the tamales. He took a long stride toward the game table.

"No! No! *Señor*, thees way! Eet ees what you call the frame, yes!"

And Dolores was plucking at the sleeve of his purple shirt. Her deep liquid eyes were staring at him queerly. Doc figured, grimly, Dolores was quick on the trigger. She was savvying he wasn't all he had seemed to be.

He saw the group around the game table breaking away. But Morez's arm still encircled the American girl. Doc heard her protest: "But I didn't do it! I didn't fire this gun!"

"*Señorita!* You are meestake!"

Smooth as a coiling sidewinder, his tone, and twice as deadly. But his white teeth showed in a sympathetic grin, as if the great Diablo Morez exceedingly regretted the plight of the beautiful American.

"Why the lowdown skunk!" gritted Doc. "I'll shore take him apart!"

"*Señor* Smeeth!" hissed Dolores, clinging to his arm. He had told her his name was Smith. "Eet ees bad trouble to—"

He was shaking off her hand. He was wishing suddenly for the pair of smooth-butted and balanced Colts in the keeping of the bartender. He was wishing his vision wasn't so much fogged up with cactus juice. But he whipped up the two-shot derringer, and he grated, "Morez! Let go of her!"

Every Mex eye, and the blue ones of the American, turned upon him. Doc heard Morez spit out, "*Gringo* peeg! You say thees to the—"

"I'd say it to the devil himself!" cut in Doc. "She didn't have that iron! Yo' put it in her hands!"

"*Señor* Smeeth! *Señor* Smeeth!"

Something smashed between Doc's ears from behind. He had the vague idea the floor had come up and hit him in the face. But he was not quite out, and he could hear excited Mex voices.

The last he heard was, "You weel go weeth me, *Señorita* Harnes, an' I weel feex everything!" The smooth Morez was talking.

DOC REAGAN was still hearing "*Señorita* Harnes" when he woke up. So the American filly was one of the Bucko Harnes girls. A darkness that smelled of chili peppers and the rank grease of frying frijoles prevented Doc from examining his surroundings. But he was lying on a soft bed that had the unmistakable perfume of a girl about it.

Chili peppers, frijoles, and a female critter wasn't any evidence of his being in heaven. So it must be the other place, still Mexico. His arms were bound and so were his legs. Some handy vaquero with a rope had done the job, Doc found out.

Voices murmured close by. Doc rolled that way. His ear was laid against crumbling 'dobe of a wall.

It brought the sound to him more clearly. The voices were those of a man and a girl, and one was the smooth, crawling tone of Diablo Morez.

"You weel make the writing as I say, *Señorita* Nora," he was saying. "I know of thees Bucko Harnes from my brother who ees notheeng but a cook. Bucko Harnes has plentee *dinero*. You have keeled Jose Morio who ees stand good weeth the rurales. So?"

"I never did it, and you know it!" cried the girl. "Yes, I had that gun, but when you held me, you snatched it away!"

For the first time Doc Reagan believed this pert filly might be worth slapping leather for, if his Colts weren't stuck behind a cantina bar, and if his present predicament wasn't so all-fired hog-tied. Aside from any personal interest there might be, he was a Texas ranger. She was an American and Texan. She must have good reason for being below the border.

But what had she been doing throwing out leads for a brown-skinned Mex bull sticker to make passes at her? The next words started Doc's muscles straining, which only tightened the knots.

"You are in the house of *Señora* Robla, my *gringo* friend," purred the oily voice of Morez. "It ees the house of the greatest caballeros and the reech hombres from Laredo. Eef you do not make the writing as I say, the hombres who come here make you their friend or what you say, weeth first the little whips then weeth keeses."

"You wouldn't dare do such a thing to me!" cried Nora Harnes. "My father will send the rangers! Why, the whole American army would wipe out your whole filthy country!"

"You rate yourself mos' highly, *señorita*," said Morez mockingly. "Eef you do not make the writing, eet weel happen. Any writing weel got to Bucko Harnes from Coahula or some other deestant place. Not any would look for the lovely *señorita* in the house of *Señora* Robla."

Doc Reagan wanted to shout curses. He felt his veins squirm under the pressure he put upon the ropes around him. For Nora Harnes had cried out, "No! You can't do that, you filthy beast!"

Doc heard the unmistakable tearing of a dress. He heard Diablo Morez laugh.

"A leetle of the whip, *Señorita* Nora, weel change the mind," he said. "I weel leave that to *Señora* Robla. I would not see such pretty skin turn eento uglee welts under the whip."

An older woman's voice croaked harshly. The 'dobe wall could not bring the swishing of a possible whip. But it must have flailed across the girl's body, for she cried out in pain, then she screamed.

"Oh, you beasts! I'll write! Yes, anything you say! Only don't do that again!"

DOC'S frantic efforts failed to free him. He made a reckoning on what had happened in the cantina? What he had seen, and what he hadn't. This fool daughter of old Bucko Harnes had invited it, of course. But he hadn't any savvy of why she had done that.

But this Diablo Morez had known who she was and about her

father's big ranch on the Nueces. No doubt the quarrel in the cantina and the shooting of Jose Morio after he had attempted to knife Morez had been an accident. Possibly Morez had snatched the girl's gun for the killing.

Then the sly-witted Morez had thrust it back into her hand. Every hombre in that casino hell-hole would swear away their shirts for the boss ramrod of Quinta. Nora Harnes might be a little richer, but she was no different from other American gals who had disappeared below the border. Others never returned, if they lived.

And if they escaped, they never wanted to go back.

"Thees weel go to Bucko Harnes," said the voice of Diablo Morez. "Until we have hear from heem you will be safe weeth *Señora* Robla. I weel come back when I have keel the *toro* in the big fight tomorrow."

"That cowboy?" said Nora Harnes suddenly. "What have you done with him? He has done nothing and he does not know me. You must let him go. He was brave because he saw I was a fellow American."

"Ah! Thees one who calls heemself *Señor* Smeeth?" purred Morez. "He ees already gone. He ees only one big fool on mescal."

"The dirty liar!" gritted Doc. "But that little palaver for a drunk waddy makes it different somehow, Nora Harnes! I'll bet my bronk yo're on some loco trail o' yore own!"

Doc stiffened himself then. A door creaked softly, opened and closed. He thought maybe this Morez was about to pay him a visit. Hogtied the way he was, it didn't seem he could do much but be a peaceable hombre. But the darkness in the room was thicker than fog in a canyon.

The bound ranger grew chilly along his spine. The moving figure was stepping toward him too quietly. Probably it would be a knife in the hand of the split-tongued toreador. A weapon to do the job *muy pronto* and with no chance for an alarm.

Doc had but one possible defense and it wouldn't be worth much. With his head and shoulders braced against the 'dobe wall, he shifted noiselessly crosswise of the bed. His lanky legs doubled against the riata wrapped around his ankles and up to his knees.

A hand reached in the darkness, touched the edge of the bed and felt slowly along it, seeking his position. Doc made one wild guess, then kicked out with all his stretching body behind his booted heels.

"Oo-ooh!"

It was the voice of Dolores, the dancing girl. Her fall made a soft thud. Doc grunted. Then he went rolling off the bed. If his heels had whacked her as he had hoped they would take Morez, Dolores might have anything from busted ribs to a broken neck.

But she gasped, "*Señor* Smeeth!" He was close to her on the floor.

"I theenk you 'ave break my arm," added Dolores. "You 'ave what you say the keeck of a mule."

"Dolores, you?" whispered Doc. "What are yo' doin' here?"

"Queek," she said. "We 'ave not the time to waste."

A knife slid along the rope

around his arms. Before his legs were free, he took Dolores in his arms and kissed her. He had been good to her, but for all her willingness and the appeal of her soft curves, this was the first time he had done t

"*Señor*—

She whispered and her parted lips responded to the caress. Kisses were possibly common enough with Dolores, but if Doc knew anything about women critters, this was the real thing. She might be Mex, but she was mighty sweet. He had bought her drinks and he had danced with her the first days he had landed in Quinta. He had been good to her, even when she thought he was pie-eyed on mescal.

And he hadn't so much as kissed her until now. So she had slipped him a gold piece after she had seen him hock his six-guns with the bartender.

IN A few seconds, as her warm body yielded to his arms, that soft-lipped kiss turned into something that never was meant for that lousy Quinta place. She was half sobbing, and her breathing swelled the firm fullness of her bosom. He took the knife from her hand and slit the ropes around his legs.

"Yo're one dang' swell *señorita*," said Doc. "An' yo' have—"

Her clinging lips came back again, and that was all the kind of conversation she seemed to want right then. Doc could feel trembling contours pressing against his chest.

Dolores said breathlessly, "Kiss me again, *Señor* Smeeth—"

Then he heard the hard voice of this *Señora* Robla raised in anger in the other room. He swore at himself for wasting the minutes. He had to put Dolores away from him.

"The *gringo señorita!*" said Dolores bitterly. "She ees beautiful! We have thees one chance, *Señor* Smeeth! The *señora* is alone with her! Take thees knife and—"

There was a flaming suggestion in Dolores' tone. Perhaps the *Señora* Robla was responsible for her being in the Quinta dive. That might account for the hate, and the knife was the Mex way of doing those things.

Doc stuck the knife under his belt as he came to his feet. Not for the *Señora* Robla, but in case of a fight it might come in useful. They emerged into a grease-smelling hallway. Voices shouted and sang ribaldly in a room downstairs. The upstairs, except for the two bedrooms, seemed deserted.

The bedroom door yielded to Doc's hard pressure and he was inside, with Dolores at his shoulder. He realized even then that the Mex dancer was putting herself in danger of death for him and for the lovely Nora Harnes, although there had been bitter and defeated jealousy in her voice a minute before.

Doc wondered why he had always believed all dance-hall girls were plumb poison?

Señora Robla was a huge, gross chunk of a woman. She heard the door and turned with a torrent of Mex invective pouring from her thick lips. She was on the point of screaming, but Doc beat her to that with a knuckled fist that straight-punched her double chins. The

(Continued on page 102)

WOLF BREED

He was a man with a price on his head, but with an honest way of looking at things. He didn't want the girl who loved him, and the girl he did love——? He wasn't sure about her until he offered his life

"WOLF" Morgan was padding the wound in his thick chest muscles when he heard the ominous, warning clink of shod cayuses crossing Black Butte creek. He grew tense instantly, knowing he would be forced to vamose pronto from the one spot he had believed safe from posses roaming the hogbacks and the malpais under the Black Butte range.

The wound was bleeding again. The bullet had drilled under his ribs and was now lodged somewhere close to his shoulder blade.

A vein had been punctured and Wolf was feeling the beginning of weakness after forty-eight hours hard riding through the badlands out of San Rajo county.

For a day and a night, Wolf had been hard pressed, and then he had lost the posses in the twisting canyons and believed he had shaken the last of his pursuers when he had made the split-log cabin on the bench slope of old Black Butte itself. He holed up here, for he had to have grub and a rest.

When he heard riders crossing the creek, he knew they must come in sight of the cabin in a few minutes. There was no other trail, no last, forlorn hope they could be headed for some other place. The cabin perched at the end of the trail, and the dust in it had proved no trapper or hunter had occupied it for months.

Wolf jammed the padding hastily into the ugly, red wound. He called out then.

"Rita, maybe yuh can stop hatin' me long enough to tie this bandage! Someun's ridin' up, an' they'll see the light! Rita!"

A slim, dark girl glided from the lean-to kitchen into the cabin's single room. Her faded, patched overalls and torn shirt were too tight, or just right, according to the way a hombre saw her.

Wolf Morgan didn't see her the way any other man would have. Her sinuous movement reminded

By PAUL HANNA

"You tricked me!" she cried. "You—!" But Burke didn't let her get any further.

him of a snake. The outlined contours of her figure, the slim sweep of her dusky throat were lost on him. Wolf was not interested. The only reason he hadn't killed her was because she was a woman.

And the only motive he had in keeping her with him was to pre-

vent her venomous tongue from looping a hang rope around his neck.

"The lawmen, yu theenk, *Senor* Wolf?" The words seemed to drip with mocking sweetness from her insolent, red lips. "Thees place ees the trap, so I ride to eet wiz you. I weel tell what I have see when—"

"Shut up, Rita!" grated Wolf with low-voiced threat. "Until I believe yuh'll tell the truth, yuh'll never have the chance to unloop yore lyin' tongue! This bandage—then blow out the lamp!"

Wolf's long, lean fingers rubbed the worn, black butt of the .45 lying along his right thigh. Rita's eyes were such glowing black, they were twin pools of hate, or so Wolf read their sign. He hadn't detected any change in them since Sheriff Horton and Palo Gomez had been gunned down in that San Rajo ruckus.

Rita was or had been Palo's sweetheart. She had screamed out in San Rajo, and an outpouring of rannies from the dancehall had looped her words.

"The Wolf ees keel the lawman!"

But before the townsmen and the waddies of San Rajo could get to their horses and get organized, Wolf had been riding hell bent for leather toward Black Butte, with the off rein of Rita's pinto and her slim wrist gripped in an unbreakable hold. He hadn't freed her until they were into the malpais, and he had taken the Colt .38 she had always carried with her.

Rita hated him, but she loved life and she was afraid. In her untamed soul and half-animal mind she was unable to read Wolf Morgan. She couldn't know that he would no more have gunned her than he would the lawman whom Palo Gomez had shot down five seconds before Wolf himself drilled his own outlaw companion, Palo himself.

He had warned Palo against outright murder, and Palo had not heeded. For Palo had known of the two Stimson brothers Wolf Morgan had gunned out, and that there was a price of 10,000 posted for Wolf, alive or dead. Palo could not understand that Wolf had only exacted a just vengeance for the dry gulching murder of his brother when he had fought it out with the Stimsons and beaten the two of them after their irons were out of the leathers.

Palo couldn't understand that, for the code of Palo was simple enough. He killed for the joy of killing, and he had regarded any man's backbone as good a place as any to plant lead poison if you had the chance.

SO PALO had got the sheriff of San Rajo County, and he would have emptied his six-gun into the dying lawman if Wolf's own gun hadn't ended his mortal career then and there.

Thus Rita, Palo's sweetheart, saw only the ruthless killer in Wolf. And there was love of life in her, and fear mixed with hate as she glided to Wolf's side in the cabin. Wolf was picturing the distance the climbing riders would have made after crossing Black Butte creek.

Rita's brown hands fastened the padding over the bleeding wound and her teeth showed from lips drawn back in taunting smile.

"When the Wolf ees in the trap,

he well not be so brave as to keel Rita," she mocked him.

Up to now, Wolf knew she had feared for the bullet she had believed would end the harum scarum life she loved. But she was just smart enough to sense that Wolf would not add another killing to his score when he knew he was hopelessly cornered.

At her defiant words, Wolf's powerful fingers locked around Rita's soft arm.

"Blow out that lamp, an' loop yore damn' tongue," he gritted with deliberate menace in his low voice.

Rita's teeth still showed in an animal snarl which didn't lessen the prettiness of her oval face. She blew a quick breath into the chimney of the oil lamp. The cabin was plunged into darkness.

Wolf's ears were keened, and the thud of horses rounding the last sharp twist in the trail, which would have hidden the cabin light, came to him. He swiftly estimated his chances. He took no hope. Rita's pinto and his own red bay were hidden far below in a pocket meadow. But the unscalable wall of rearing Black Butte arose directly behind the cabin. There was no possible place for long concealment outside, and but the one narrow gap trail up which the riders were now ascending.

"We've been seen or a posse picked up some straight trail sign, else they wouldn't be ridin' up here," he muttered. He still clutched Rita's arm in a grip that brought hissing breaths of pain.

Wolf's free hand rubbed the butt of one .45, but he knew he never would use his irons against law-abiding men. The law was riding up, and that spelled trail's end for the owlhooter way he had taken. For Palo Gomez had been but one of the outlaws he had joined.

First, he had rustled the herds of the Stimson brothers, and thus he had brought them into an open fight. For he had possessed no proof except his brother's dying words that it had been the two Stimsons who had dry gulched him. The Stimsons had been a power in San Rajo County. Now the San Rajo sheriff had been murdered. The blame for that lay upon his shoulders. Palo Gomez had been one of the outlaws he had joined up with to strike at the Stimsons. So Wolf could see no chance to escape the hang rope, and he realized too late that he had been loco to turn owlhooter as he had, even for vengeance upon killers.

Yet when he had been plain, easy-going Bill Morgan with his brother Joe on their small Twist U spread, he had found life pretty good. But now he bore the name of Wolf, and more than one outlaw crime he had never committed had been laid to him.

So Wolf revolved everything in his mind and it all come to but one answer. It would be a better death to walk out there now. Walk out and trigger his sixes into the air. The climbing posses, now so near the darkened cabin would cut him down almost instantly by the blazes of his irons.

Well, he would wait until the possemen pulled up with caution against riding into the bullets from his guns. Likely they would dis-

mount and spread out, covering the cabin from all sides.

Then something loco about the steady thudding of the horses' hoofs beat upon Wolf's brain. The riders were not pulling up. They were making the final sloping rise of the trail just below the cabin.

COULD it be possible, after all, some chance pilgrims were riding to the cabin that had not been visited in months. Then Wolf realized from the sound that there were but two riders. And as he did, a girl's clear, pleading voice rang out in the dark silence.

"Burke! Please, Burke! You can't go on with this loco notion! Your father's been my dad's friend all their lives, and he—"

"I told you once an' for all, you first off do as I say, an' then you'll hitch up with me!" grated a harsh, interrupting voice. "My father's mind has been spooked by age an' short times. I'm doin' all the roddin' now of the bank! So—"

Wolf missed the rest of this, for the quick indrawn breath of Rita made him think she was taking a chance on screaming out, and he had just then figured they could make it out of the cabin through the leanto. For the owners of those voices were anything but grim possemen with knowledge that Wolf Morgan was holed up in the cabin on Black Butte.

Wolf's hand shot up to muffle Rita's mouth. But she didn't scream. Her own free arm suddenly slipped around his neck and her warm, parted lips sought his mouth before he guessed her intention.

"Yuh damn'd hell cat!" he gritted into her teeth, as he suddenly released his hold on her arm. "What yuh wantin'—?"

"*Senor* Wolf—" Her words were gasped. "Eet ees now when you touch me so, I know eet ees no longer the hate I have for you! Eet's love—eet's—I weel now tell what ees the truth for you! I weel say Palo ees keel—"

Wolf heard the horses reined up outside the cabin. The trembling, demanding softness melting against his body had but the effect of creating the sickness of disgust in his innards. It might be true, for Rita was that kind, in love with life and not likely to be loyal long to the dead, and it might be a trick.

Either way, in the space of seconds some hombre with a lot of hell on his mind, and a girl whose voice somehow struck straight to Wolf's heart would be pushing open the unbarred door. Wolf took the shortest possible way out.

His head jerked back, and his knuckled fist shot up to the rounded chin of the clinging girl. He didn't dare to pull the punch, and he realized instantly he had hit Rita harder than he should. For she made no sound, but her head went back and her arm left his neck as she fell. He heard the crunch of her skull as it struck the stone of the fireplace.

"God!" he grated, dropping instantly beside the girl, and lifting her in his arms. "I had to kill even a woman!"

"Burke! What was that? In the cabin?"

The girl's voice sounded outside with a quick, clear note of fear.

"Nothin' but some damn' varmint!" snapped the man's voice.

"Maybe a porky or a polecat! Wait! I'll see as soon as I find a match!"

THE unbarred door creaked. Wolf catfooted across and into the lean-to kitchen with Rita's limp figure in his arms. He could feel a warm trickle of blood from his wound as a result of the effort, but he was through the door and well to one side in the outside darkness before he placed Rita on the ground.

In the cabin the glow of the relighted lamp suddenly leaped out the open door.

"Ain't nothing here!" spoke the harsh voice of the man called Burke. "No use you tryin' to back out now an' run any ranny on Burke Smith, if you don't want to see your dad ridin' off the T-S spread with nothing but his hoss an' his warbag!"

"If you knew how I hate you—"

Wolf had a clear view of the girl in the yellow glow of the oil lamp. And just as her voice had struck some responsive chord in his heart, the girl's bright-haired loveliness in that light sent a tingling like he had never felt before along his nerves.

Wolf Morgan knew that instant that there stood before him the girl he had once, as Bill Morgan, pictured as ramroddin' the ranchhouse end of the Twist-U. The tingling of his nerves was succeeded by a cold sickness that chilled his spine.

He saw that the girl was wearing only a thin gingham dress, and the lift of her young bosom against it was outlined. She looked little more than a child, and Wolf didn't have to be told she had been forced by this damnable Burke Smith to come here against her will.

Probably he had looped her in suddenly, or she would have been in riding togs. The voice of Smith again came sneeringly from inside the cabin.

"Come right on in, high an' mighty Miss Mary Parker who's always been too damn' proud to see even the son of a banker, 'cause he has a flat nose! You act nice or I crack down on your dad's already overdue note of nine thousand dollars, an' the same with interest which he can't nowise manage to raise with that lean beef on the T-S!"

This Mary Parker's head turned and her face lifted, and icy rage flooded Wolf Morgan. She seemed to be appealing helplessly to the stars to help her and the clean beauty of her face almost stopped Wolf's heart.

"Yes," he heard her say desperately. "If you brought the note along, Burke, an' if I see you burn the same, I'll not run away."

Her slim, perfect legs flicked through the lamplight and she was inside the cabin out of Wolf's line of vision. The owlhooter scarcely realized what he was muttering.

"If I'm havin' to dance on nothin' with a rope under my ears, what the hell an' all diff'runce would another killin' make?"

But the thought brought him back to the unconscious Rita. He felt for her pulse and couldn't find any. The blood had ceased trickling from her head, but her black hair was wet with it.

This time, he could feel only that he was directly a murderer. This

was unlike the gunfight killings of the Stimsons, or being responsible for Palo Gomez gunning down the San Rajo sheriff. True, he had meant only to silence Rita, to avert their discovery, but the result was the same.

He came to his feet, shuddering at knowing Rita's blood was on his hands. And in the cabin, this Mary Parker suddenly screamed out.

"No, Burke! Oh, God! You lied to me! You don't intend to burn that note! Let me go! Please, ain't you got any pity at all?"

Feet scuffled on the floor, and Burke Smith rapped out a vicious oath.

WOLF didn't hear all of it, for a chair banged over and he had reached the doorway of the cabin. He dallied his rush just before he came into the light. For the first time he saw the ugly, flat-nosed Smith, an hombre with a sloping forehead and hardly any chin under an ugly mouth.

And Smith had ripped the gingham dress of bright-haired Mary Parker. One brutal arm was around her and one filthy hand was at her throat.

"I'll make you proud to get hitched up with a Smith at all!" the locoed attacker was shouting.

Mary Parker was moaning, beating weakly against Smith's face. Perhaps Wolf had never been in a greater killing rage, and yet he had never thought more clearly than now.

With a .45 already in his hand and a bead on one of Smith's stubby ears, Wolf found a grain of sense such as he seldom ever had experienced. His angry instinct was to send a bullet crashing into the brutish brain and his thumb had pulled back the hammer, but he let it down.

"If I drill 'im, it'd get out that Mary Parker was up here with him," he said. "Mebbe so someun saw 'em ridin' or knowed they was together. An' it would be ruinatin' for her. But if'n he's got that note on him, an' he just comes to with a headache—"

All in five seconds, for the girl's struggle against Smith's brutal strength had almost ceased.

Wolf's .45 swung and bucked in his hand. The oil lamp smashed with a glassy crash. The Wolf was lunging through the doorway in the darkness. The .45 was back in its holster. He wanted to feel that little chin of Smith's cracking the skin over his knuckles.

He did get in that one skin breaking punch, but in the darkness it landed upon Smith's hard skull and Smith stayed on his feet. Wolf lunged again, striking out, sure that Smith would attempt to counter that first blow in the darkness.

The sharp crossing swing of his fist and his own weight almost threw Wolf from his feet. Then he was cursing a little, almost tempted even now to salivate the banker's son.

"Yuh d a m n' yeller-bellied skunk!" rasped Wolf. "So yuh ain't got no fight in yuh except for some helpless gal critter!"

For the flat-nosed Burke Smith had made a rush and cleared the doorway. Wolf fought back his desire to cut Smith down with a bullet. Then he heard a horse start

away, half loping, half sliding down the steep trail.

"Who—who are you?" came the trembling voice of Mary Parker.

SHE was right beside him and a soft hand reached out and touched Wolf's cheek in the darkness. It couldn't have hit him harder if a redhot branding iron had touched the flesh.

"It don't—don't matter who I am," he said hoarsely, his fingers reaching up and clasping the soft hand. "Seems as how I happened to be proddin' this range just in time. The dirty sidewinder's gone, miss, an' he won't be comin' back."

He could feel Mary's rounded arm trembling. Perhaps it was the reaction of her emotions from the terrible experience, for she cried out, "Oh, you're good, whoever you are! What you've done! It's in your voice! I—"

What she might have said was suddenly transmitted into action. Wolf felt both her arms creep about his neck, and her tender, clean mouth was on his lips. He couldn't have fought off doing what he did if he had tried. His spine chilled and there was a weakness inside that was more than the steady loss of blood from the bullet wound.

His arms went around her and he held her close to him for long seconds, knowing it was all wrong, as he took her grateful kiss.

He didn't think then that the blood of his wound was staining her dress.

"Who—who are you—please?"

Mary was gasping out the words, and even now she hadn't removed her arms from his neck. Then it was that Wolf Morgan, owlhooter, made a great part of atonement for bloody mistakes, although he did not think of it that way.

"I can't tell you the truth, Mary Parker," he said slowly. "Do you think you can ride back to the T-S alone? I heard everything, Mary, but I can't leave here now and, I can't ride with yuh."

Wolf could feel the tumultuous riot of her heart against him. He knew he had to put her away from him, and now.

She said slowly as his strong hands held her shoulders. "You say you heard everything, stranger? Then you must despise me for coming here—"

Her voice faltered and Wolf couldn't keep from kissing her again, in a firm but different way.

"To the contrary, Mary Parker, I'm a heap admirin' yuh for tryin' to save yore dad," he said.

And as he said it, an idea flashed into the conscience-racked brain of Wolf Morgan. It was such a thought as made him decide then and there the girl must not see his face.

Mary said tremulously, something in her voice proving how desperately she wanted her unseen rescuer to understand. "My dad will be heartbroken and it will kill him to lose the T-S. He's been there thirty years. If Burke Smith's father was well, it would be all right. But he's been sick a long time, an' they say he's out of his mind."

Because his idea was uppermost now, blazing into life and adding to his strength against exhaustion from loss of blood, Wolf became

(Continued on page 114)

4 HANDS

FIRST off, the bloody red of his brand new Angora wool chaps smote the eyes of every gawky-mouthed beholder around the station platform at Stubtown. His gaudy silk 'kerchief and his slickly polished, hand-sewn boots with gleaming silver spurs did even a better chore of smiting.

Then there was his new, black Mexie sombrero banded with its shining conchas. Worst of all, the sheen of the walnut butts of two .45s neatly strapped to his thighs was not from the wear of useage. They were the newest in hoglegs that had been seen in the Red Mountain range country in many a day.

The effect upon the assembled gapers of Stubtown was all bad. It completely clogged up the minds of Stubstownsmen in hand-me down store clothes and waddies in overalls without chaps who wore but one gun apiece, which were not strapped down.

"Dog take my whiskers," mumbled an old-time cowman. "I cain't be seein' it. So it must be them last 'leven swigs o' redeye fermentin' in my innards."

"It's thar, surer'n sin!" spat out a horny-handed old puncher with awe in his voice. "I'd be admirin' to know—Gawd! Mebbe so 'tis the redeye gone proddy on us, Pete! Didn't know even a tender-footer dude done sech things! Might be it's a woman critter!"

The last was called forth by the highly peculiar action of the slim, young hombre in the fancy duds who had alighted from the coach of the Stubtown spur's mixed local train. Some of the old-timers went so far as to swallow their long cut cuds and choke. For the newly arrived pilgrim with the brand of dude Easterner all over him, was rubbing his fingernails up and down along the kid leather sleeve of a hand-made coat.

And damned if he didn't hold up his hand and pucker up his mouth some as he inspected the shine on his nails. It was too much for a ganglin's, drunken puncher to bear up under. The puncher let out a locoed "yippee!" His eyes became red-rimmed and he went on the prod.

"Been totin' a peaceable hogleg an' swearin' I'd never gun me nothin' no more 'ceptin' a kyoot!" he yelled, whipping out an old, bone-handled six-gun. "But thar's limits! Name yore name an' yore bus'ness, stranger, 'fore yuh spook all these rannies hereabouts! Name, pilgrim?"

The dude looked up from inspecting his polished fingernails, and seemed to have the sun blink in his eyes as he peered at the likkered waddy.

"Why, I was informed it was considered an insult to propound an interrogation of that character out here in the wide, free west," he said slowly. "But my full name is Londos Van Hiliburton, and my business is, well, it's rather my

DOWN• •

By FRANK DECKER

The two-gun dude was an insult to the naked eye of right-living hombres! Even Mary agreed to that——until she found the dude could sling lead at the hired gunmen

Struggling, Thurston was dragged away by the angry waddies.

own personal affair, don't you think?"

But before he got to his name, the drunken puncher was several hoss lengths beyond thinking.

"Yi-ippee!" he squawked, and his six-gun jumped and spewed out smoking lead that chewed into the platform so close that a bullet nipped the sole of a hand-sewn boot. "Yuh got t' tough up them tender feet o yore'n! Insult, huh? Yuh're an insult to the naked eye o' right livin' hombres! Git to dancin', yuh—"

At this juncture the slim dude jumped as if a bee had stung him. He made no move to draw his fancy guns. The open-mouthed crowd knew he must be spooked. The onlookers imagined he was about to hit the trail out of the line of fire, but that he went blind loco and weaved in a panic straight toward the belching .45.

Then he seemed to realize his mistake as he collided with the drunken, proddy puncher. The dude threw himself suddenly to one side and slightly backward. One silver spur caught in a rotten plank and he hit hard on his hunkers. It then appeared that to save himself from the fall, he had thrust out hard with the other boot.

Nobody was close enough to see clearly what happened. But the dude was climbing to his feet with a panicky, worried look on his clean shaven face, and the proddy, shootin' puncher was still lying on the platform, rolling and howling with pain, as he clawed at one knee-cap.

"What—what happened?" stammered the dude. "Perhaps I have done something to violate the customs here, but I was informed that by alighting at Stubtown, I would be only a few miles from the Broken Rail ranch of—"

HE PAUSED in his speech to stare at the figure of a girl in a white, linen dress with a flaring skirt blown by the Montana wind. She had jumped from the seat of a rickety buckboard as the proddy puncher started shooting. It seemed to the dude she was flying rather than running along the station platform, her small feet were so light.

And the tricks the wind was doing with the linen skirt turned all eyes away from the dude. For there weren't any other legs in Montana like the shapely pair that helped her to run so lightly. And the dude had an idea there couldn't be many other legs like that in all of the states.

"Harden, get up and stop that bawlin'!" rang out the girl's clear and penetrating voice. "I told you the next time you likkered up y' could get your time. Climb to your feet!"

The girl thrust out a strong, sun-browned hand and twisted it into the frowsy mop of the downed puncher's hair. He stopped howling and he got up, groaning.

"Reckon mebbe so I made a mistake, Miss Mary," he got out between groans. "I'll git my nag an' be ridin' pronto."

The puncher limped away. The girl turned toward the dude, and he saw the kind of an impudently pretty face that should always go with legs like hers. But there was a trace of worry along with the

natural sauciness of her blue eyes, even if her firmly rounded chin was tilted upward and she smiled with warm, red lips.

"I'm Mary Hastings, Mister," she said to the dude. "I guess you must be Mr. Haliburton, an' if so, we drove in to meet you?"

The dude's eyes blinked as if he was a little bewildered. He gave the girl a sheepish grin and he said, "I wasn't quite expecting the honor, Miss Hastings. I didn't imagine you would know the time of my arrival."

Her laugh was low and throaty, but there was a little frown with it as she took in the dude's fancy rigging, and glanced over at a warbag so new that it still smelled of the store it came out of at Twin Falls.

"Have but one train every two weeks, so we couldn't nowise miss it," she said. "Looks as though you came prepared to sleep out, Mr. Haliburton. But the Broken Rail does have a spare room, and we can put you up, even if this is the wild, free west."

Her red mouth twisted a little with humor, but the dude stared at her and didn't quite seem to understand the sudden haw-hawing of some of the nearest hombres.

"I came prepared to do some horseback riding and a bit of roughing it while I am looking around, Miss Hastings," he stated with dignity. "So I decided it would be best to be fitted out for any emergency that might arise."

"I see," smiled Mary Hastings, looking at the new walnut-butted guns. "But I would untie the holsters of the hoglegs, mister, unless I was honing for trouble. There's only one kind of hombre out here that ties down his irons, and some of these slack-brained sheep herders might get wrong ideas."

"Gawd!" rumbled one of the old-timers. "They hain't nobody but Mary could say sheep herder right out loud in Stubtown an' git away without lead pizen in the brisket!"

The dude turned to pick up his warbag, but a grizzled, bald-headed man with buck teeth already had it and was heaving it into the buckboard. This hombre growled, half under his breath.

"Thar's them damn' Thurstons, Mary. We'd best git ridin'."

The dude appeared to miss this, seemed to be pondering upon what the girl had said about his tied-down guns. His hands looked too white as he slipped them down and slowly loosened the leather thongs that held the holsters to his thighs. But as he did that, Mary happened to be watching his mouth and she could have sworn that he was grinning quizzically as if something had amused him.

"I'm not informed as to the customs," said the dude. "But I was given to understand some disagreement might arise out of my buying your boss's share of the Broken Rail."

"If you're meanin' it might come to a gun ruckus, mister, it already has, and more than one," said Mary quickly. "But we'll talk that over while we're riding out." She was observing him curiously again. He had said "boss share" instead of controlling interest.

THEY crossed the platform, and were passing the corner of the box station. And as the dude reached this, there was a sound of

moving feet and a quick, little cry. He had a flashing glimpse of a tall, willowy girl whose tightly bodiced silk dress clung to her curving body, except where the skirt had suddenly flipped up to expose at least the second best pair of legs to be found in Montana.

The girl had tripped on a protruding spike, and she was falling forward. The dude was quick, but not quick enough to prevent her going asprawl at his feet.

Those smooth silk stockings were far from being the fashion worn by women critters of Red Mountain range. But he had little time to cogitate upon the gal's extra scrumptious duds.

For the dude tangled his feet and fell beside the spine tickler as he made an unsuccessful effort to hold her up. She cried out with pain and two soft arms tightened around him. He was looking into the blackest and most limpid eyes he had ever seen. Wispy black hair was blowing across his face and it felt as fine as silk threads.

As he managed to disengage himself partly, a heavy voice boomed out, and the dude's attention was drawn to a bulky man with a chin that jutted and eyes as hard as gray granite.

"What in all hell yuh tryin' to do, Cora?"

The big man towered above the slender dude and the girl. His hands had bony knobs for knuckles. He toted but one gun, but the cedar butt had the wear of much usage.

The girl, Cora, didn't make any effort to remove herself from the vicinity of the dude's breastbone.

"It's all right, pa," she said between clenched teeth. "Seems as if I have broken my knee."

The dude got to a sitting position. Any man would have admired to have had his chore then. Her kind of knees have been spooking honest, God-fearing hombres since human kind started riding the range.

There was a gouged and bleeding cut just below the bend of the knee. The dude pulled his breath in deep, put out his hand and did what had to be done.

"It isn't fractured, only cut and bruised, Miss—Miss Cora," he stammered. "I'll bind it up until we can procure some antiseptic. This will do."

He produced a clean, white handkerchief from inside his coat. His face was pale and without a trace of sun tan. But it seemed to be whiter now. Miss Cora's full, red lips puckered a little. Then she obligingly slipped down the garter of her torn stockings.

"Gawd!" opined the old-time puncher in a choking voice. "I been 'round these parts nigh onto forty years, an' *this* happens to a stranger!"

A SLIM brown hand was suddenly laid upon the dude's wrist. The clear, low voice of Mary Hastings spoke.

"Some chores are more fitten when done by a woman, Mr. Haliburton. I'll take care of this, Miss Thurston."

The dude's white face went red. He gave Mary the handkerchief and climbed to his feet. His blinking eyes were blue, and they were level with the hard, gray ones of Cora Thurston's pa. He recalled

what Mary's buckboard driver had said.

"Thar's them damn' Thurstons!"

Cora's pa said, "Reckon yuh're the Haliburton hombre what's honin' to buy out Mary's share o' the Broken Rail?" Then Thurston grinned, and it wasn't pleasant. "I'm Buck Thurston, Haliburton."

The dude nodded and stuck out a white hand. Thurston added, "So yuh kin act right neighborly at times, can't yuh, Mary?"

Mary was bandaging the other girl's cut knee. The other girl was glaring at her as if she didn't like it. Mary didn't glance up at Buck Thurston's harsh words.

"I'd be willin' to do the same for a sick cow," she said.

"Why, you—ouch!" sputtered Cora Thurston as Mary suddenly pulled the 'kerchief knot across the bleeding knee.

Cora was looking up at the dude, as if she preferred he had kept on with his first aid. Mary got to her feet, helped the other girl up, and turned away.

"We'd best be ridin', Mr. Haliburton," she said quietly, "before you meet up with some more funny accidents."

The bald, buck-toothed driver had been introduced as "Hank" Parsons. the veteran ramrod of the Broken Rail. He was ugly, but he was smart and he showed a fatherly interest in Mary Hastings. The buckboard rattled along the stony wagon trail across the slope below the Red Mountain hogbacks.

"That's the way of it, Mr. Haliburton," said Mary. "I didn't know old Jim Smalley had made his will that way 'til after he died, an' Lawyer Marks told me he had left two-thirds of the Broken Rail to me, an' one-third to young Jim Smalley, who's been in state prison for night onto eight years. Old Jim was almost like a father to me, an' he was bitter against young Jim."

Hank spat through his buck teeth and clucked at the ponies.

"Yup!" he put in. "Old Jim was all busted up when the boy went maverick on 'im, an' gunned a gambler fatal over to Crossbow. Reckon 'twas an accident some o' young Jim's lead sent the town marshal along with the gambler to Boot Hill, but the marshal was backin' some crooked games. Sent young Jim up for twelve years. An' I allus had a sneakin' suspicion some of the Thurston outfit had a hand in that gun ruckus. Buck an' some riders was there, an' their say-so sent Jim away."

The dude had his 'brero off. He had short, blackish hair that didn't seem to go with his blinking blue eyes.

"I didn't quite undertsand the situation," he said. "It isn't likely to be pleasant. You inform me that this murderer's—this convict's father left him with one-third in order that you might control the Broken Rail and give his son some of the profits. He might become annoying, this—this jailbird."

"We have never heard from him," said Mary. "It's only because I ain't wishin' to keep the bossing share that I'm selling. I wanted to give it all up, but Lawyer Marks says the will won't stand any changing of its terms."

Beads of sweat appeared on the dude's forehead.

"I'm sorry I wasn't more clearly informed," he said. "I've been wanting to try the experiment of living outdoors, but I don't want any trouble. If I'd known—"

Stones suddenly clinked and rattled under the feet of horses getting into motion in an arroyo off to one side. For a minute or two the riders were invisible. Hank Parsons spat and swore.

"Dang my time, I been expectin' a ruckus ever since I seen them Thurstons! An'—"

FOUR riders came heaving out of the arroyo. Bandannas masked faces under battered Stetsons. Short guns whoomed in their hands. Lead made little geysers in the road dust. The buckboard pintos, shied and snorted, reared, and beat Hank's jerking hands as they got the bits in their teeth.

"By ——" It seemed the dude was about to become profane. But he changed it. "They're desperadoes!" he gulped. "Perhaps they have been informed that I have the money for the ranch upon me!"

"Of all the locoed, tenderfoot pilgrims!" snapped Mary, and the light buckboard jumped ahead and swayed as the ponies settled down to the business of running away. "Get down, Mister!"

A bullet whanged off the dashboard and spatted into the back of the seat between Hank and Mary. Mary didn't see then how the new and fancy hoglegs of the dude came into his hands. She could feel the exploding jolt of one through the dude's arm against her side.

The masked bandit who had fired that close bullet suddenly stiffened in the saddle. His head snapped back as if the slug had got him dead center in the forehead. The pintos slashed between the remaining three riders.

"Git the driver!" bawled a voice. "Thet'll throw 'em off!"

The dude's elbow vibrated in Mary's ribs again. The bandit leader screamed out an "aw-rr-gh!" He went backward out of the saddle. Hank had the reins of the runaway ponies wrapped around his wrist. He bent suddenly forward groaning, and pitched from the seat.

Mary gave a little scream and tried to catch him as he fell and rolled clear. The dude's white hand gripped her shoulder and held her from following Hank, as he let one gun bang to the boards. The remaining two bandits started pounding promiscuous lead after the rocking buckboard.

"Lemme go! You fool!" Mary was creaming at the dude. "Hank! He'll be dragged to death!"

Then the dude heard whamming of new guns farther back among the road. He cocked an eye and saw Buck Thurston's team of spirited bays coming along fast. The blackhaired Cora Thurston was driving. Her pa was on one knee and his old six-gun was punching out smoke and lead.

This unexpected attack seemed to cause the surviving pair of holdup bandits to change their minds. Their horses wheeled from a pursuit of the Broken Rail buckboard

and they high-tailed it for the protection of the arroyo.

Hank had freed himself from the ponies' reins, but he was a huddled heap alongside the trail behind them. The dude was rearing to his feet, and Mary was sobbing and staring back at the wounded ramrod of the Broken Rail.

Mary didn't seem to hear the dude swearing now between clenched teeth. His cuss words proved the East isn't any more refined than the rough and ready West when it came to that kind of lingo.

Then Mary screamed again. The ponies swerved and the light buckboard rode two wheels a few yards and went over. Mary was in the dude's arms. He managed to twist as they fell, his body taking the impact. The dude's mind went blank on account of a flat rock that hit the back of his skull.

A COOL, damp cloth eased the ache as the dude blinked his eyes open. He was lying on blankets and the dim light coming through one square window without glass told him he was on a bunk in some sort of a cabin.

He heard a light step and just made out the gliding shadow of a girl coming toward the bunk. He managed to make his dry tongue work.

"Mary—Miss Hastings—are you—I mean you are not injured?" he got out.

The girl didn't speak until she had reached the bunk with two quick steps. She dropped to her knees, put one rounded arm under his head and removed the cool cloth.

"I'm not—not Mary," she said huskily. "Oh, Mr. Haliburton! It's awful! Both of poor Mary's arms were broken! Hank was bleeding badly, and pa is driving with them to the doctor at Crossbow! And I—was afraid—that you might die, even if pa did say you hadn't anything but a bad bump! Pa hadn't room for us in the buckboard!"

The dude tried to lift his head, but Cora Thurston was suddenly trembling with sobs, and her arms tightened around him. In spite of the situation, the dude couldn't help being conscious of the young warm curves touching him, and he was a damn' sight more conscious a bare second later of soft, parted lips pressing his mouth.

"Oh!" she said breathlessly. "I don't know why—why I did that! I have been so afraid you were worse hurt than pa thought! I—"

She began sobbing again, her body trembling and her arms holding the dude closer. Well, he wasn't hurt seriously enough to lose the use of his own arms. . . .

It wasn't that he stopped thinking about blue-eyed, pretty Mary Hastings. But he could do nothing for her now.

His hands feld Cora's curving back bend and yield. The demanding warmth of her lips was almost dizzying.

It seemed that Cora Thurston was a young woman who was hungry at this minute for only one kind of comforting. She whispered, "I knew it—knew it somehow—when you had your arms around me after I fell—I—I think I've been waiting—"

The dude ended her waiting with

(Continued on page 79)

TAKE COVER

By STAN WARNER

Wade knew he was letting himself in for something when he agreed to fight the GPU, but he didn't guess he would be subjecting to torture the girl who helped him. In a last stand, though, guns speak louder than secret operatives!

WADE WARREN was smacking his lips over the last lousy swallow of pulque, in the Cantina Blanca at Agua Fresca, when he heard the furious gallop of a horse out in the street. There were shouts in Mexican about a woman without any clothes, and Wade tossed his last sixty centavos on the counter and strolled out the door.

A huge black horse pulled up in front of the State Building across the street. A nearly naked girl rode in the saddle, leaning forward in exhaustion, her bare shoulders burned red by the sun. Her wrists were tied to the pommel. The horrible relic of a man tied behind her had no wrists. His hands had been cut off and the stumps were raw and unhealed. His eyes had been put out.

A crowd was gathering around the black horse. Wade told himself that this was no business of his. And took another look at the girl and walked across the dusty street. Someone was coming hell-for-leather down the steps of the State Building, and Wade butted right through a herd of *vaqueros,* Mexican cowboys from over the line. He buttoned his leather jacket around the soft-bodied *senorita,* untied her wrists from the pommel. He picked her up in his arms and started up the steps. Wade almost ran into the party who was running down the steps. He was tall and grey-haired with strong heavy features and a face so red it looked boiled.

"Take her into room five!" he said, and Wade could tell that he expected to be obeyed; so he pressed the *senorita bonita,* who wasn't so far gone as she pretended, against the place where his heart was supposed to be.

He could feel her heart hammering against his chest. Was he bothered? Hell, no! He was Wade Warren, and that funny feeling that crawled along his spine wasn't anything but a drop of honest sweat.

Room five loomed up, white and sanitary looking; he put her gently as possible on the couch. Of course, he being awkward as a yearling calf, his foot slipped and damned if he didn't find his lips right smack against the warm flesh of her throat.

He could smell a vague warm perfume and he felt her quiver after a minute and heard her sigh, and in came the grey-haired man with the boiled face carrying the poor

They threw her to the ground and prepared to stake her to the anthill.

wretch that was tied to the saddle girths.

He jerked his head toward the couch as he laid the poor devil on the big oak table and demanded, "Is she all right?"

"She'd be all right," Wade said. "Even if she had on some clothes. Shut the door!"

Boiled Face pushed two *vaqueros,* a chink, three *muchachos,* and a Mexican Hairless out the door and locked it. He said: "This *would* happen on Sunday, with nobody here but me." He produced a hypodermic from somewhere and gave the poor devil a shot.

"To ease his pain," he explained, and proceeded to go through the wretch's pockets like an expert "dip". From inside his coat he brought a dirty, blood-stained paper, opened it and began to read. Then he looked at Wade.

"Can you read Mex?"

Without a word Wade took the note and read out loud:

"We hope you like the way we have entertained your friends this month. Mr. Carter has all the information you sent him to collect. All of it! Your problem is how to get it from him. His eyes do not see. His ears do not hear. His

hands do not write. His tongue does not speak. Our surgeon is very efficient. The woman! Ah, we enjoy the woman very much but unfortunately Mr. Carter could not return alone. Please send more women. Their skin is so white.

—Los Agresores."

WHEN Wade had finished reading, the gray-haired one could see that all the blood had drained from Wade's face, leaving it white as a silver peso. Now, he had always considered himself top hand at cussing Los Agresores, but this gray-haired caballero put him in the shade.

He blasted them for five minutes and never repeated himself once. Finally he stopped and squinted his eyes at Wade.

"I need a man," he said.

"Don't look at me, pard," Wade came back. "I'm just a poor broken down coyote."

"I'm H. H. Masterson."

Wade smilled. He'd heard many times of old "Hard Head," as he was called through the Southwest.

"Me, I'm Wade Warren." He said, wringing the proffered hand, and knew he should have minded his own business.

He saw Masterson open his mouth a little.

"Oh, so you're Wade Warren."

"Damn it, yes, and I reckon I'd better get going before I get into trouble."

"Wait a minute," the gray-haired one said. "Aren't you the man that pulled Bland Gardiner out of the black hole at Piedras Negras?"

"I never did like Piedras Negras but I know the Alcalde there. He's a good scout."

"Do you know Mexico very well?"

"I manage to keep two lengths ahead of Los Agresores."

"Then I take it you and the Agresores aren't friends."

"Right," said Wade. "My father was Mexican. He became a general under Obregon. He was shot by Los Agresores. So was my mother. They had smuggled me over the border."

"Would it be impertinence to ask who your mother was?"

"Loretta Griselle."

"Oh, the American actress." He studied Wade a minute. "I think you're just the man I need."

"I was afraid of that."

"What have you been doing?"

Wade grnned. "Me, I've been eating cactus worms."

Masterson grinned too. "I hear they're good. I mean where have you been working?"

"Me?" Wade laughed. "I don't work. I live on my fat."

The gray-haired one looked at Wade's tall, gaunt frame.

"Well, you'll live better from now on. You're going to be a cowboy looking for a job."

"Si." He grinned, allowing his legs to bow at the knees. I am *un vaquero.*"

HARD HEAD walked over to the table and stood looking down at the unconscious form of his mutilated agent. "Take a good look at M 21 before you take over this job. You may come back looking like this. Even if Doctor Bates can save his life he'll never thank us for it."

Wade looked into shrewd gray eyes. "Do you want a man or don't you?"

Hard Head extended his hand. "Wade Warren, you are no longer a man. You are a number." He took a small book from his pocket and made a notation.

"You will be known as M 23. Here. . . ." He walked to a steel cabinet, unlocked a drawer and extracted a plain manilla envelope. "Your orders and your money are here, together with a list of the agents that may be able to help you if you get in a jam. Never use them unless you have to. Memorize their names and burn the list immediately."

Wade took the envelope and moved toward the couch to get his jacket, which was still buttoned around the Señorita. She was lying completely relaxed along the couch, asleep from exhaustion. Her breasts rose and fell with every breath. Her soft white stomach moved up and down like the warm shifting sands of the Rio Grande.

"We'll wake M 20," said Masterson. "She won't have any information or they wouldn't have let her go, but she will know where to find Los Agresores."

"Never mind," Wade said, slipping the jacket carefully from under her and taking a last deep look at her curved voluptuous hips. "I know where to find Los Agresores."

"Watch for M 22, Warren. She may know something."

Wade grinned. "If it's a woman I can't miss her. *Adios, amigo. Hasta la vista!*"

IT WAS two days before Wade reached Chapultavaca, because he had to go west along the Rio Grande from Agua Fresca on the Texas side and swim his *caballito* across to keep from meeting the border patrols. Just at the edge of Chapultavaca he got off his pony beyond a little white house built of sillar, a soft native stone.

He examined Pedro's right front foot for a stone bruise. He was whistling shrilly, "La Cucaracha." When he had tossed away the stone that wasn't there, a withered, dwarf-like Mex came out of the white sillar house. He was balancing a red and yellow basket on his head. The basket was filled with oranges and brown momey fruit.

Evidently going to market, he passed as Wade mounted Pedro.

Wade pointed to the oranges, *"Cuanto cuestan as naranjas. amigo?"*

The withered one returned and put the basket on the ground. *"Cuatro por cinco, Señor. Cuantos quiere?"*

Wade told him he only wanted one. Angrily the Mex started to pick up his basket and walk away. Then Wade offered him the price of four for the one.

The Mex grumbled but finally took the copper *cinco centavo* piece and the note that was folded under it and handed Wade a large orange. Wade rode on up the Calle Poltron toward the Zocolo, which was the center of town, peeling his orange and tossing the peelings at the *gallinas* pecking in the gutter.

In the middle of the orange just beneath the navel which had been carefully cut out and replaced he found the little slip of coarse brown paper. He took off his sombrero to scratch his head and holding the

paper inside the crown he read, *"12 Calle de Torres, Jueves, a las ocho. Comer fruta mamey."*

"Oh, he remarked to himself, "tonight at eight he will eat mamey fruit at number 12 on the Street of Bulls. Well, I like mamey and twelve is my lucky number."

It was seven-thirty when he bought the brown pear shaped mamey at the *mercado de frutas* to the right of the Zocolo. At eleven minutes to eight he stopped his pony on the side street just beyond number 12 Calle de Torros. Dismounting, he left Pedro in the shadow of a pepper tree and walked around the corner peeling back the brown skin of the mamey. As he stopped in front of number twelve he took a bite of the rich coral meat.

Two *Mexicanos,* both devouring mamey, arrived in front of the gate at the same time. They looked at his mamey and smiled, *"Buenas noches, agresor."*

Wade grinned and said, *"Buenas noches, Agresores. Son las ocho."*

THEY opened the narrow gate and entered single file. At the end of a covered passage they came out into a tremendous flagstone patio lighted by a single electric bulb suspended in the middle. A dozen pigskin-covered Indian tables were scattered among clumps of banana and bamboo.

Groups of Agresores were seated on woven grass seats at a table drinking *cerveza negra* and *pulque.* They raised their hands in a peculiar salute. Wade and the Mexicanos all returned the salute and sat down at an empty table.

They talked. One, Wade learned, was Lieutenant Juan Cajenas and the other was Lieutenant Ermione Calzano. They were from Guayaquilpa. They had fifteen hundred *agresores* ready to take over the town. Wade was from Piedras Negras and modest. He had only six hundred and fifty Agresores ready to revolt. This was the last meeting. Soon hell would begin to pop.

A little señorita appeared at their table with black beer. She was one of those phenomena that happen once in a while in Mexico, a blond. Her hair, the color of ripe maize, was braided down her back. Her skin was the deep tan of curling eucalyptus bark. Her tile-blue dress was shirred so low across the front that her red-gold breasts thrust inquisitively over the embroidered edge.

Wade glanced down the delicate hollow between them. She smiled slyly at him. He grinned.

Juan Cajanas smacked his lips over a deep gulp of beer, and putting his arm around her slender waist, pulled her against him. She slapped his face and laughed as she walked away slapping the gourd trap against her bare calf. Calzano whispered across the table.

"Cuidado, Juan! Perlita pertenece al jefe!"

So, Wade took note, Little Pearl belonged to the chief. He looked slowly around wondering who the chief was. Leaders changed so often in Los Agresores. But the leader couldn't be present or he would have resented Cajanas' familiarity with his *mujer.*

"So," Wade said to Calzano, "the *chula* Perlita belongs to whom?"

Calzano whispered, leaning so

close Wade could smell garlic and cheese. "Perlita belongs to *el Jefe,* Alfredo Montador. . . . Careful, he comes!"

THE patio by now was full of Agresores, lieutenant leaders of their districts. From an archway at the far end appeared a man who stood head and shoulders above his followers. Black mustachios drooped like crow's wings from his sullen upper lip. His color was too florid for a Mexican.

Wade recalled a line from the orders he had memorized and burned, "Watch the long arm of the Russian Secret Service, the Ogpu!"

Everybody rose and gave the Agresores' salute. Montador's

He took careful aim and shot Montador in the mouth and neck.

sharp back eyes darted back and forth across his group of followers before he returned the salute. Wade felt Montador's eyes flicker across his own. Was it possible the chief knew every face so well? Montador uttered a low resonant command.

"Sientense, Agresores! Estamos todos aqui? Are we all here? Let us begin!"

They all sat in absolute silence as Alfredo Montador mounted a square block of white sillar and tower above them. He spoke in a deep voice.

"Agresores, Sunday we strike!"

There was a murmur of approval. Mentally Wade noted it was Thursday and wondered at the delay.

"We would have struck tomorrow. Fifty thousand Agresores stand ready to drown the capitalists in their own blood. We have the arms. But the ammunition was delayed. Tomorrow it will cross the border at Las Palmas. . . ."

An Agresor appeared from the passageway and stepped up to the stone block. He spoke excitedly in a low voice. Montador cursed him for the interruption but the Agresor persisted. For a minute there was a dead silence as Montador's eyes again took in his lieutenants.

"There is one too many of us," said Montador, quietly.

For an instant it was so still Wade could hear the hammering of his heart against his ribs. Then everybody rose, heads darted vindictively back and forth, murmurs grew into a growl. Wade found his two companions glaring suspiciously at him.

"Silencio!"

The growl died down. Wade felt a prickle at the base of his skull. Cajanas and Calzano were glaring hostilely at him.

"Temiente Cajenas, Who is with you?" said Montador.

"Lieutenant Calzanos, Jefe."

"Who is the other?"

"He says he is Lieutenant Warren."

"I do not seem to remember Teniente *Warren.* Where is *Teniente* Warren from, Cajenas?"

"He says from Piedras Negras, Jefe. We met him at the gate. He was eating mamey."

"Teniente Warren, ven aca!"

Wade had to have time to think, so he obeyed. He passed among a hundred hostile Agresores to the front of the block of sillar. Montador looked him over calmly.

"I do not remember you, Lieutenant Warren. We have few Agresores at Piedras Negras. What is your first name, Warren?"

Wade shoved his hands carelessly into his pockets.

"Wade."

"Wade Warren!" he let out his breath with a staccato sigh. There was a hostile rumble behind him. "So, at last we meet. You have come to join us, perhaps."

Someone laughed. Wade dug his nails into his palms to keep from shooting the man in cold blood.

"I'm afraid we will receive you rather coldly. I think it is a matter of seven years since. . . ."

Wade interrupted with just one word.

"Ogpu!"

Montador's florid face turned purple. His mustachio lifted in a

snarl. His eyes exploded with hate. He roared:

"Take him out to the ant hill!"

Wade pulled his Colt as he whirled. Two shots got the single bulb and left the patio pitch black. He threw himself against the side of the block of sillar and felt his way behind it. There were shouts and curses and above the din, as he crawled through the archway toward the house, he heard Montador's bellow:

"Bring a light, fools! Bring a light!"

WADE reached the wall of the *casa* and, getting to his feet, crept along it trying to find the door. His hand touched something soft and warm. It was a throat and it did not move. He ran his hand across smooth bare shoulders. His finger tips tingled. His nostrils dilated to the faint clean perfume of a woman.

"It is Perlita. Wade Warren, come in quickly!"

He heard a door click shut behind him. There was a dim radiance from a charcoal brazier. She motioned to an open window.

"Through the *ventana. Pronto!*"

He got one leg over the sill. She reached down and planted her hot, wet, velvet lips over his. He came up to meet her in a passionate embrace. She said, "*Buen suerte!* Good luck!" as he dropped to the dusty side street.

He uttered a low whistle. Immediately he heard the clatter of hoofs and Pedro nuzzled his cheek. He was very smart, this *caballito*. In a moment they were on the Calle Polron and headed for the desert. As Wade passed the white sillar house where he bought the orange from the little withered peddler with the basket he reached down from the saddle and snatched up a woven bamboo box that sat in the shade of the wall.

He turned right, down the arroyo outside of Chapultavaca, and followed the dry stream bed until it dipped into a narrow fissure. Then he stopped and dismounted. Ducking down, he quickly lit a *cigarro* and by its orange glow wrote five words on a small square of paper.

"Munitions Tres Palmas Friday night."

Carefully opening the top of the woven bamboo box he clasped the carrier pigeon gently around the legs. He lifted the broad rubber band on the right leg and inserted the rolled slip of paper.

There was a whir of wings and he knew that old Hard Head would soon be chuckling with satisfaction.

WADE took a swift drag on the *cigarro* and ground it out against a rock. Then he mounted Pedro and in ten minutes they were threading their way between spike-tipped maguey, flat-leafed prickly pear, and the tall dignity of the organ cactus.

On a rise of ground from which he could still see the faint yellow lights of Chapultavaca he bedded down for the night with Pedro's blanket for a mattress and the saddle for a pillow. He could hear his *caballito* crunching *yerba seca* a few yards away.

Wade wondered, before he fell asleep, if that *diablo*, Montador,

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Don't Mix Love and Law

(Continued from page 33)

if'n so he does, he'd best be mindin' his P's and Q's. I reckon Beulah ain't needin' no added reason why Big Jake Pelter would marry her."

Lank worried a little about Big Jake. He guessed there might be trouble there. He eased the pair of .45s Sheriff Benn had unexpectedly donated.

"Then there's—"

That was worse than the idea of Big Jake's possible anger. Abbie Turner? She would be on the stage. His sister?

Hell! He had to do some thinking *muy pronto*. He considered how he might possibly cabin the trusting Abbie in one place, and keep her from meeting up with Beulah.

"An' git myself strung up for polygamy," he muttered.

His inward thoughts slowed up. He suddenly discovered he was being trailed. A rider was keeping pace with him out in the brush. Once in the moonlight he caught a glimpse of a horse.

It was a spotted paint pony. It might be Beulah's pony. He turned aside, trying to snag the other rider, but the trailer was too smart for him and vanished.

"Well, I'll just meet that stage at sunup at the ford, an' see if there's any chance o' Miss Abbie Turner bein' misbranded," he muttered. "Maybe so I should-a likkered up an' been a—"

His own words gave him a new idea. He turned and headed his horse for Dobie Tarano's moonshine still up above Fool's Gold creek.

SHORTLY before sunup, Lank Lavery weaved in his saddle. He pulled up at the stage crossing ford of Fool's Gold creek. He still had a vague sense of being trailed, but he was too fogged up on redeye to care about that.

"Be a hellerish, high smellin' polecat to be meesh-meeting up with a Saint Looiee woman," he said solemnly. "Sister o' mine, too, an' I gotta treat her right'sh, seein' I'm the law."

He rubbed at the star on his vest. Again he heard sounds of a lurking rider, but he was more interested in another swig from one of Dobie Tarana's hell-fire bottles.

The high-wheeled Concord rattled out of the early dawn darkness of the pass and down into the morning light of Fool's Gold creek valley. Mike Bender was slapping the buckskins along.

Lank saw Marty Pearson, the express company guard, riding the seat with a Winchester across his knees. As the stage hit the creek ford, Lank grew suddenly sober.

He corrected that undesirable state with another pull from Dobie's white lightning. Then he finger-combed his hair down over his eyes, unbuttoned his shirt and adopted what he imagined was a drunken grin, which was no drunker than the grin he had been wearing.

"Mish Abbish Turner, howsha do," he rehearsed. "Jush celebratin', thash all."

From the prim letters he had received from Miss Abbie Turner, Lank judged that would turn the trick.

Marty Pearson slapped the buckskins into the creek. And all hell busted loose up in the nearby willows. A short gun cracked. Mike Bender, the driver, who had handed the reins to Marty Pearson, uttered a groan and splashed into the creek.

The next thing, Marty Pearson had his rifle up, shooting. Three masked riders broke from the willows. They were blazing away, and Marty Pearson rolled off the seat.

The six ponies reared and plunged. At that, Lank forgot several ideas he had reheased. Dobie's redeye ran through his veins and hit his brain. He let out a whoop that could have been heard a mile.

Then he was spurring into the creek, riding straight for the three masked riders. The biggest rider whirled. Apparently all he saw was the shining law badge, for Lank's 'brero was over his eyes.

The big masked holdup cut loose with his short gun three times. The bullets fanned well over Lank's head. Lank heard the big bandit call out.

"A'right, Benn! Whyn't yuh roll off, or d'yuh want I should nick your thick skull?"

The truth broke upon Lank's stimulated mind. This bandit was mistaking him for Sheriff Benn. He was making a ranny play to have the sheriff roll from his horse.

"All hell!" grated Lank. "So that's why Sheriff Benn was so all fired free an' willin' with his star an' his guns! He was framed in on this, an' he is opinin' I'll git drilled!"

It all happened in five seconds. Lank did roll from his horse. He hit the creek, just as it seemed to have been planned. And then he came up shooting. He poured lead from both .45s, and he poured it fast and promiscuous.

The big bandit was the first to take a header, cursing. Then Lank got a second bandit. But the third was riding back, his irons blazing.

Lead thudded into one of Lank's legs. Another bullet ripped through his 'brero.

Lank couldn't nail the bandit who was riding low on the horn of his saddle. He was not too badly wounded to lunge for the nag's reins. He brought the horse down. The bandit slammed into the creek.

The horse dragged Lank off balance. The cursing bandit drew a steady bead on him and he had no time to duck. Off to one side a gun cracked.

The last bandit lay down on his face in the water.

"Yippee!" yelled the voice of Stumpy Callan. "Knowed I'd come onto suthin' if I followed your sign. We got 'em. An' the big one ain't no other than Big Jake Pelter himself!"

As Stumpy yippee-ed again, his horse shied, stuck one leg in a creek gopher hole and went down.

Stumpy turned a somersault and lay on his back, very still.

LANK LAVERY saw the face in the stage window that could be none other than that of the tintype under his shirt. He saw two men in store clothes climbing out of the stage.

One man had a thick gold chain across his vest. Lank moved fast, after one more glance at the bony features of Miss Abbie. He bent over the recumbent figure of Stumpy Callan.

Stumpy was knocked out, but he was breathing all right. Lank moved one hand quickly, straightened up and walked back to meet the pair of strangers.

"Howdy, mister!" said the one with the gold chain. "You just saved the express company $50,000 in currency. You'll get a reward, mister."

"I'm Lafe Carter, the mayor of Buzzard's Gap, and I've been away almost a year," said the other man. "I see one of the dead holdup men is Big Jake Pelter. I always knew he would get it some day. But I saw a sheriff's star a minute ago. Where is Sheriff Benn?"

Lank hiccoughed before he replied. Then he looked very sad.

"Too bad about Sheriff Benn," he said. "He ain't been lawman for nigh onto a year gone. Lank Lavery's wearin' the star. That's him over there, an' he got here jest in time to gun down one of them varmints."

"But you, mister, who are you?" said gold chain.

"Me?" said Lank, watching Miss Abbie Turner, with a bustle just like in the tintype, prancing from the stage over to the recumbent figure with the bright star on his vest. "Why, I'm only a creek panner who happened along. Name o' Callan. Say?"

Lank was over, staring drunkenly at Miss Abbie Turner.

"Lady, you're the skinny woman critter poor Lank has been carryin' in his shirt, an' moonin' over when he thinks nary one's lookin'," stated Lank, bending quickly over Stumpy.

He took a tintype from Stumpy's shirt.

"Yup!" he said. "Same skinny one with the bustle!"

Miss Abbie Turner of Saint Looiee, was down on her knees beside the sleeping Stumpy, pulling his head to her bony bosom.

Lank turned back as he was swinging into the saddle.

"Yuh might tell Lank Lavery when he comes to hisself, ma'am, that his share of a gold cache with Stumpy Callan will be waitin' for him, an' that Callan said he was leavin' for Silver City pronto or sooner."

Lank topped the creek bank on his horse. He looked back. The silver star shone brightly upon the vest of the unconscious Stumpy.

Lank thought of a pair of blue big eyes, of clinging red lips and of all and sundry that awaited. He glanced again at Stumpy's head hugged to Miss Abbie's hard bosom.

"So he wouldn't ride herd on Sheriff Benn's gal while I went an' collected me a star," said Lank softly. "Well, this will sure be a lesson to Stumpy when he wakes up."

Take Cover

(Continued from page 73)

would put Perlita on the ant hill since she helped him escape.

Just before dawn his whole body was tingling with excitement. He was crushing Perlita in a violent embrace and kissing her with furious ardor. He awoke. Pedro's warm nose was nuzzling his face.

In ten minutes Pedro was trotting briskly toward the sand hills to the south of Chapultavaca. That was where the ants abounded.

They took cover in a clump of organ cactus just as the sun poked a red eye over the Sierra Madras. Wade sliced the top from a large cactus so that Pedro could lick the sweet stick juice. Then he climbed cautiously to the tip of the nearest sand hill and threw himself flat on his stomach. He didn't have long to wait.

He saw three horses ride out of the Calle de Torros onto the sand flats and head his way. They were still half a mile off but he could see that the center rider was a woman. Her hands were tied behind her but she rode with her head up and ignored the men on either side.

Just below Wade was a flat-topped hill dotted with odd-shaped hummocks. Each hummock represented a colony of ants. These ants were half an inch long, deep red, and would eat anything except stone. Insects, scorpions, spiders, rodents were delicacies.

An army of them would attack a small snake, sting it to death and carry it away bit by bit. They were very fond of human flesh. . . .

The three riders stopped on the flat-topped hill. One of the men dismounted and drove four stakes into the ground beside a hummock. Then the other dismounted and together they pulled the girl from the horse. "She has more guts than I would have," thought Wade. She didn't make a sound or try to struggle.

The larger man spoke sharply. Wade couldn't make out the words. The girl lay down between the four stakes, face up. They tied each hand to a stake above her head. Then they tied each foot to a stake. Her body formed the letter "X".

The small man took a clay ollita from his pocket and poured something in the girl's eyes, ears, and mouth. Honey. Just to entice the ants to begin! After they once began they wouldn't stop until they had the bones as slick and clean as a whistle.

The larger man was Montador, Wade was sure. He gritted his teeth and spat. He would have liked to kill them both and leave them to the ants, but he didn't dare. The shots might rouse the other Agresores.

With a final gesture of contempt the large man reached down and, grasped the blue dress at the neck, ripped it off her golden body. She lay there naked but for shreds that clung around her waist and breasts. Even at that distance Wade could see the full sun-tanned breasts, the gently curved hips and soft expanse of stomach.

The large man sat on a flat rock, took a hunting knife from his belt and spat on the edge of the rock, began whetting the shining blade. Wade could see the white of Perlita's eyes, they were so wide with horror.

AFTER a moment of whetting he reached over and scraped the razor edge against the gold bulb of her breast. Wade could see her quiver. Then, with a flash of steel, the keen edge flipped across white flesh.

Blood spurted in a stream down her pale stomach. She gave a little cry of pain and her body tensed. Wade went berserk. Sick, he rose with the Colt in his hand. He screamed, "Montador!"

Both men turned and went for their irons. Wade dropped to cover as two guns belched fire. Then he took careful aim and shot Montador in the mouth and neck. It was more painful there and he would not die so soon.

The small man was trying to mount and ride away, when Wade shot both his hands from the saddle and then broke his spine at the neck. The Agresore's head fell backward like a deflating balloon before he keeled over and buried his face in the soft dirt of the ant hill.

Wade wiped his mouth on his sleeve and reloaded the Colt as he walked down to the flat-topped, hummock-speckled, hill. When he reached Perlita she was writhing and making little sobbing sounds. The ants had already begun their deadly work. Her face and head were one solid mass of *animalitas*.

Wade picked up her torn and mangled dress and wiped the mass of ants and honey from her face. Then he untied her hands and feet. She threw her arms around his neck with a little moan.

He said, "Let me go, Perlita. I've got some iodine and bandages in my saddle bags."

She said, "No, no! Do not leave me, I do not hurt. My arms feel so-o good around your neck."

Her arms tightened. Her honey-laden mouth opened enough for her pink-tipped tongue to glisten in the sun. Wade remembered the other Agresores and tried to keep his senses.

He said, *"Por Dios, Perlita! los otros Agresores!"*

She quivered in his arms. "The other Agresores have returned to their towns. We are safe now. Wade Warren, Perlita loves you."

He felt her whole body tense against his in a shiver of ecstasy. His mouth closed over burning lips....

Coming Next Month!

"GUNSMOKE FOR SALE"

Four Hands Down

(Continued from page 65)

a savage, almost brutal crushing of her lips. She moaned softly.

THE thudding of hoofs and the clinking of harness set the dude pushing the girl hastily from him. Rattling wheels and the harsh and heavy voice of Buck Thurston announced his return. But although the dude did his best, Cora was still in his arms when the door of the shack cabin opened and the bulky figure stood there in the light that streamed in.

"Well, I'll be damned!" the rancher roared. "Cora! Ain't yuh got a mite o' shame! Get away from there!"

Cora's arms slipped from the dude's neck. She stood proudly and her lovely poised head was thrown back.

"I don't care, pa!" she flamed defiantly. "There ain't any other man like him ever come to Red Mountain!"

Thurston fixed his granite eyes upon the dude as he sat up on the edge of the bunk.

"Waal, pilgrim, yuh're throwin' a damn' wide loop for a checkacko, which means a tenderfoot, Haliburton," said Thurston. "In these parts yuh mebbe ain't savvyin' they's only one answer to foolin' 'round a decent gal?"

"How is Mary Hastings?" said the dude quietly. "Your daughter tells me you took her to Crossbow to a doctor. And Hank Parsons?"

"Yuh got the guts to—"

"I asked you a question, Mr. Thurston," interjected the dude, getting lazily to his feet. He was studying the afternoon sun slant across the door of the cabin. He estimated the time that had elapsed since the wagon trail gun ruckus.

"The doc down to Crossbow says Mary'll be all right, but her arms will keep her abed some time," grunted Thurston, eyes swinging to his daughter's eyes swinging to his daughter's face. "Hank was only nicked in the shoulder. Now I'll admire t' have yuh come back t' Cora, Haliburton—"

The dude suddenly smiled tightly. Crossbow was more than twelve miles away. He had passed through the trail town on the Stubtown local trail. That sun slant indicated it had been less than an hour since the shooting and runaway. Mary Hastings and her Broken Rail ramrod could not be in Crossbow under a doctor's care. They had to be somewhere within three or four miles driving range.

The Broken Rail was less than two miles away. Thurston owned the C-8 spread bordering it toward the hogbacks. Mary had told the dude that before the shooting.

The dude blinked his eyes, looking at Cora's piquant, pretty face, her liquid dark eyes. His gaze traveled over her tempting contours. Even an Eastern dude could do worse, seeing it was his first day on Red Mountain range.

But what the dude said took a short, quick dally in Thurston's apparent anger. .

"If that is the custom out here, Thurston, I can't say I don't like it. Your daughter's preference has to be considered. You are suggesting we should be married?"

"Darling!" said Cora quickly, coming to his side. "You heard what I said about you being the man I love. Do you mean—?"

"I'll soon be controlling the Broken Rail next to yours, Thurston," interrupted the dude. "If Cora wants it that way, perhaps I could learn something from you about managing the feeding and marketing of cattle. I'm looking for profit, and I'm putting my last twenty thousand into buying Mary Hastings' share, or I was. Now there's this young Jim Smalley, who will be making trouble, and I do not wish to engage in any really serious controversy."

THURSTON'S hard eyes went to the dude's hand-tooled holsters and the polished butts of the six-guns hanging to a belt over a chair back. They came back and studied the dude half a minute.

"Either yuh or old Hank done some a' mighty handy gun slingin' in that hold-up, Haliburton," he said slowly. "An' Hank's iron hadn't been fired. Two bullets was gone from yore one iron, an' they was two of them hold-ups dead. Mebbe so yuh ain't honin' fer trouble, but yuh had a heap o' luck in yore shootin' fer a checkacko."

The dude's grin didn't change. One arm was around Cora, and she was snuggled to his shoulder.

"I put in a lot of time on a pistol range back East, Thurston," he said. "I took some riding lessons, too. How about both of us putting our cards on the table? Even if Mary Hastings had both arms and both legs broken, you didn't take her to Crossbow. So you are waiting to discover where I stand. I know there are some waterholes you need over on the Broken Rail, and I'm not wanting this Jim Smalley hanging around when he is released any more than you."

"Damn' peart, ain't yuh?" snapped Thurston, but he grinned. "I was hopin' as how you might be the kind that'd see the light. Keno, Haliburton. Yuh buy Mary's share, an' knock down the price all yuh kin. Then we'll get together."

The dude nodded, his mouth suddenly in a hard twist. He lifted Cora's chin and kissed her warm, clinging lips.

"Perhaps you have discovered some way to persuade Mary to sell at a lower figure," he suggested, turning back to Thurston. "I suppose it would be proper to offer a split on what may be saved?"

Thurston's knobbed knuckle hand slapped the dude on the shoulder.

"I'd allus heered Easterners was slick," he said cheerfully. "I guess I heerd it right. Mary'll sell her share of the Broken Rail fer a heap less'n the dinero she was askin'. Reckon it would be best if yuh rode up to whar her an' old Hank is waitin', an' make it seem like yuh hadn't seen us folks. Her an' Hank was plumb out when we got 'em picked up."

The dude again glanced at the low slant of the sun.

"That is wise, Thurston," he said. "But suppose I encounter

some of the cattle herders from the Broken Rail? They might be looking for Mary and Hank."

Thurston stepped to the door and gave a shrill whistle. More than a score of hard-faced hombers rode down from an arroyo above the cabin.

"I'll show yuh the trail, Haliburton, an' we'll be backin' yore deal in case any of the Broken Rail rannies has the luck t' come onto the place," said Thurston.

"And I'll be waiting for you, darling," said Cora, slipping her arms around his neck and kissing him.

LESS than ten minutes later the dude rode across a clearing to a hewn-log cabin set below broken rock shoulders that were green and mossy from water seepage. He had a glimpse of Thurston and his riders circling off to one side and making for those rocks.

As he swung from the C-8 brand pinto, the dude heard a low cry, a plaintive moan such as some hurt animal would make. When he reached the doorless doorway, the dude first saw Hank Parsons sitting propped up against one wall, and it was easy to detect that he was staying there because one leg was broken and a lass rope bound his arms.

The plaintive moaning ceased abruptly. The dude then saw Mary cruelly bound to a rough table top by her wrists and ankles being secured to the table legs. Her dress had been torn almost from her, revealing glimpses of her undergarments.

"Mary—Miss Hastings!" he exploded. "I almost missed finding you! Who did this? Did those desperadoes—?"

"No! Oh, no!" sobbed Mary, the movement of her head showing the brown hair that flowed to the floor. "Please—Thurston! Oh, I want to die—"

She was hysterical. The dude was slicing the lass rope and he was taking her bruised figure suddenly into his arms. He held her as she sobbed and trembled, but his mouth did not seek her lips.

"Thurston?" he said slowly.

He seemed unable to say anything more, and she nodded miserably.

"Yes," she whispered.

The dude heard Hank swearing steadily, incoherently.

"An' by hell! I'll live t' slit his gizzard—Mary—yuh ain't sellin' yore share—not fer no price whatsoever—yuh ain't quittin' ontil Thurston's dragged 'hind a hoss's heels—yuh—"

Mary's tanned face was gray and pinched, but the pain in her wide blue eyes only made her prettier.

"No—Hank—no!" she cried out, and she was down beside the wounded ramrod of the Broken Rail. "We ain't sellin' our share, Hank—not to no Eastern dude or nobody—I'm holdin' on t' drill Buck Thurston for myself!"

The dude saw her eyes lift to his face and he spoke.

"I am asking you to reconsider that, Miss Hastings," he said in a hard voice. "I have the papers and twenty thousand in cash, and your letter offering to close the deal. You will have to accept it, or I will—"

She flashed to her feet quickly.

She was like a vibrant, angry goddess as she faced him.

"I'm keepin' the Broken Rail now, an' I'm givin' Thurston the range war he's been honin' for!" she exclaimed tensely. "You had best be forkin' that Thurston nag out there an' ridin', Haliburton! I can read a brand, an' you didn't pick up that hoss astray! You want the Broken Rail for Thurston, an' you'll never get any part of it! Now ride!"

The dude's white face twitched and his mouth was tight. Even then Mary was range wise enough to notice that his fancy guns were now holstered with their butts forward, which meant he knew all about the fastest and deadliest iron slinging, the quick cross draw.

"You ain't no dude," she said through clenched teeth. "You're some Eastern gun slick hired by Buck Thurston, an' if you killed me now, you'll never get a foot of the Broken Rail. I'm holdin' it now to see that Jim Smalley gets his third share an' more when he's out of state prison."

"You cannot back out of a—" began the dude.

A RIPPLING crackle of short gun fire stopped his speech. It came from the clearing below the cabin. The dude jumped to the open doorway. A scant dozen riders of the Broken Rail spread were pounding recklessly into the clearing. Old Hank let out a warning yell.

"It's our own waddies, Mary! Git 'em to cover! I'm bettin' this damn' dude skunk had 'em trail 'im up hyar, an' Thurston's all fixed to 'bush 'em! Tell 'em, Mary!"

The dude was barely quick enough to trap Mary's darting figure as she attempted to pass him in the doorway.

"Get back an' stay down!" he snapped, and there was something new in his hitherto hesitating voice.

But Mary screamed and clawed at his face. Then guns roared from the rocks above the cabin, and the dude saw two Broken Rail riders pitch from their saddles. The others who had ridden into the clearing reined sharply to one side, hitting the ground and diving for all the shelter there was.

But Thurston's tough gunnies had all the advantage and they were raking the clearing with lead. The dude's teeth clicked. One hand came up with the heel of his palm catching Mary's rounded chin. Hank bellowed a mad oath and attempted to free himself.

But Mary was out cold. The dude pulled her away from the doorway. Then he was outside, a gun in one hand and white, folded papers in the other. He rounded the corner of the cabin and a Thurston bullet jolted him and turned him half around.

"Stop it, you damn' fool!" yelled the dude. "I got it, Thurston! Hold 'em off!"

The Broken Rail riders didn't seem to know about the dude, but they heard his shout. Bullets whizzed and whined around him. The dude turned and his iron blazed toward the Broken Rail waddies. He heard Buck Thurston call out harshly.

"Hold up! It's the danged dude!"

The dude made for the big rock

from behind which the voice came. He was still shooting back at the Broken Rail riders. Then he heaved himself over the rock with remarkable agility. Thurston's granite eyes were upon him and the boss of the C-8 had a hard smile.

"Y' got the shares off'n Mary?" he demanded.

"I have them—for half the price asked!" stated the dude. "I found her ready enough to accept! But I don't believe it would be a wise idea to permit her to live and talk, Thurston!"

One of his riders was crouched beside the C-8 boss. The dude contrived to land between them.

IN THE cabin, Mary got to her feet, crying out. Hank's oaths were silenced.

"Y're kerrect, Mary!" he grated. "That damn' dude's hired by Thurston! He was gunnin' our boys as he high-tailed after knockin' yuh out! His pizen neck'll be stretched with Buck's!"

Mary got over to a window. Short guns were making a bedlam of sound from the rocks and across the clearing. A Broken Rail rider tried to run for the cabin doorway and buckled down with a dozen slugs blasted into him.

Mary was gray-faced, and she was staring at the smoke of the irons above the rocks.

"Seems as you're right, Hank," she said slowly. "But just now something's tellin' me we're wrong —that we—"

And at that instant, behind the big rock, Thurston reached out one knob-knuckled hand for the papers that the dude was holding. The movement of the dude was probably a faster play then than any hombre on Red Mountain range had ever seen.

One emptied gun left his hand with a straight throw. The tough gunny beside Thurston was of no more use in this fight. His skull split over his ear under the impact of the thrown iron.

Before the surprised Thurston could act, the dude's other gun came into his hand with a lightning cross-draw. The muzzle rammed into Thurston's thick neck. And the language ripping from the dude's tongue all at once was stripped of all its Eastern polish.

"H'ist yore damn' hunkers up onto that rock, Thurston! Climb up there an' stop this gulchin' or you'll know what it is to have a slug churnin' in yore gizzard!"

"But — but Haliburton — for God's sake—what—?"

The dude's free hand jerked around and smashed Thurston's thick lips back upon his teeth.

"Start climbin', an' if you make a wrong move, I'm seein' y' live to know when yore damn,' filthy carcass is draggin' at the heels of a hoss!"

It was then that Thurston's granite eyes looked more closely into the dude's, and his face went bleak. He started up the rock, and his arms waved. The dude remained crouched and his gun was upon Thurston's spine.

"Hold up!" yelled Thurston hoarsely. "We—we got all we been aimin' fer, an' we're ridin'! Git to yore hosses!"

His cursing gunnies slunk back through the rocks to their tied

cayuses. Hoofs clinked and pounded. And then it was that the dude sprang up beside Thurston, as the remaining Broken Rail riders sent a lead poison farewell to the retreating gunnies of the C-8.

The dude was looking at the figure of Mary in the cabin doorway.

"Git down an' start shaggin' for the cabin!" he commanded, and even the grammatical Easternism was gone from his voice, as he started Buck Thurston on what was much like a grim, death march toward the cabin.

Half a dozen Broken Rail waddies were high-heeling it across the clearing. The dude's voice rasped out.

"I'm handin' yuh Buck Thurston, an' when I'm sayin' he brought Mary to this cabin, yuh know what the answer is! An' in case you rannies don't savvy, I'm Jim Smalley!"

Knuckled fists were smashing Buck Thurston down as the dude walked toward the cabin doorway and Mary. A grim-faced veteran waddy was looping a lass rope around the saddle horn on a rearing pinto. Another waddy was circling another loop firmly under Buck Thurston's arms.

INSIDE the cabin, the dude was holding Mary tightly in his arms.

"I've been out o' prison more'n a year, an' I made some good deals back East," he said. "I come honin' to buy out yore share in the old Broken Rail, 'cause I never had any mind but to lick Buck Thurston for the frame-up in that killin'. Shore!" And the dude was grinning a little. "My red hair was easy to blacken up, an' I guess eight years changes a hombre a lot, inside an' out. So I'm offerin' yuh a fair price—"

Her head was thrown back and her lips stopped him.

"You ain't tellin' me more than I suspected when you started slingin' your guns, Jim," she whispered. "An' there ain't dinero enough to buy out my shares in the Broken Rail. But Jim—"

"Yes, Mary," he said hoarsely, and the kind of a kiss that was between them would have broken any will.

"It Ain't Speed!"

(Continued from page 21)

the men saw Tanglefoot, skylined. He gestured. All drew pistols.

Tanglefoot rested the ponderous rifle on a rock, and took careful aim. The Sharps roared. A horse and rider rolled in the dust. He fed in another cartridge, and without fumbling, for these shells were big enough for a man to grab hold of.

Boom!

A saddle emptied; a horse raced along, riderless. And now Tanglefoot began to understand his plan: make them fight on his ground, not on the field they chose. Actually, it was a memory, not a plan. Unhurried, he reloaded.

But the charging riders were wheeling. They wanted none of this long range massacre. Tangle-

foot fired again, and missed.

Fife's men finished the party. The trail cutters, playing for a lightning attack, had spent their horses; they were too winded for the retreat that their panic now demanded.

When it was all over, and the one captured raider had been hanged to a wagon tongue, Lem Fife eyed Tanglefoot and demanded, "Breck, how come you thought of that? I figgered you didn't have sense enough to come in outen the rain?"

Tanglefoot pondered for a moment. "Depends on how long it rains. I wasn't thinking, I was remembering. How a fellow by the name of Glenn Irwin come at me, running and hollering and shooting, so I ducked and up and let him have it when his gun was empty. Couldn't shoot it out with him, being too slow. Same with these fellows. Knew they'd come back mad and boiling."

Fife scratched his head. "Huh! Looks like it ain't always speed that counts."

THE trail herd reached Albuquerque without further threat, and on the way, Tanglefoot had time to think things out. Rosemary could not spend all her time laughing at him. He began to see a way out. Twice now, he had won simply by picking the right position. It might work with women. And on the way back, Tanglefoot devised the details. He remembered Bird Cage Annie's parting words: "Don't try to be smart if you ain't born thattaway. Jest get a holt and keep on holding."

Once Tanglefoot passed the general store at Dos Palos, the miles seemed to shrink, and his resolution made him dread facing Rosemary. He hung back, riding with the chuck wagon, letting the others get well ahead.

When he saw the flat roofed house and the old cottonwoods, the corrals and the feed stacks, he wanted to turn and pursue his vanishing resolutions. Then he caught a glimpse of the Sharps rifle, and regained some of his nerve.

The wagon rolled on, past the house. Tanglefoot dismounted to get himself a drink at the pump. He had barely filled the tin mug when Rosemary came running from the group of newly arrived trail drovers.

"Oh, there you are! Dad told me all about you." She looked him over from head to foot. "That was wonderful, Breck. I'm so glad you're riding for us."

In the evening light, she was lovelier even than she had been, that afternoon at the store. And she was closer now, looking up at him, eyes agleam with friendliness. He did not know what to answer, but Rosemary solved that problem. One glance over her shoulder, at the laughing cowpunchers still gathered at the corral, and then she came closer.

She caught him by both arms, tiptoed, kissed him before he knew what had happened. "If dad had been hurt, I don't know what I'd have done."

By then the shock of that kiss had worn off, though Tanglefoot still could not think of anything to say. He wrapped both arms about her, squeezed her until every curve flattened against him. He pressed

his mouth full on hers. The whole world became a blaze of glory. Then she tightened, twisted her face, cried out in a voice just short of a whisper, "Don't, you fool! Haven't you any sense!"

She wriggled clear, and ran to the house.

Tanglefoot licked his lips, passed the back of his hand over his mouth, and muttered, "Gosh, I might've known she was just mocking me."

One fool move, and he'd spoiled everything. But later, he remembered that she had been careful to keep her protest from being heard very far.

CHAPTER V

Kidnaped

RIDING for the Diamond F was a nightmare, for now he had a plan that was blocked by awkwardness. Every time Tanglefoot drove the sled with its water barrel from the well to the kitchen, every time he hauled firewood to the back door, Rosemary unwittingly taunted him. And when he saw her, hanging clothes out on the line, her lithe body taut, her calico dress drawn tight against leg and bosom, he invented a new approach—

And abandoned it.

One night, there was a light in her window. It was late, so he tiptoed from the bunkhouse for a closer look.

Propped up with pillows, she was reading one of the paper-backed dime novels he had seen lying about the house. He came nearer, until he could see the lift of white curves as she sighed, stretched, blew out the lamp. While he could no longer see, he could hear her, stirring restlessly.

"That there romance has got her all fussed up," he told himself. "Anyway, if I clumb in, she wouldn't dast raise her voice. Her pappy's always telling her reading that kind of trash gives folks fool notions."

But he pulled his hand from the sill as if it had been red hot. She might whisper, "You big lout, just because I tried to be nice for what you did for dad, you think you can sneak up on me like this?"

Still, he had to prove himself, so that he could go back home, fire-tested, and no longer a bungler to make Ida laugh. Bird Cage Annie's drunken counsel was true; he knew it was. Success did something to a man, and speed was not all.

There was another cattle drive, and when the herd was two days out of Dos Palos, he rode from the sleeping camp. It was easy: the relief man came to take over the night watch, and Tanglefoot headed for Dos Palos, instead of taking his horse to the remuda. Whatever they might think of his disappearance, they would not guess his real purpose: for it was so wild and final that Tanglefoot was not afraid.

As he galloped back toward the Diamond F, he knew why cattle rustlers, ready to dance at the end of a rope, were more calm and collected than the executioners.

He rode all that remained of the night, and all of the day which followed. There was one stop at a long deserted cliff dwelling, some miles off his direct route.

The sun was setting when he returned to the Diamond F. And when he saw the buckboard which Rosemary had driven from Dos Palos, the play was on.

DURING the absence of her father and the cowpunchers, Rosemary stayed with Cy and Mrs. Smith, and drove to the ranch every day to spend an hour or so watering the garden, feeding the chickens, gathering the eggs. All this routine was part of Tanglefoot's plan.

Rosemary was picking radishes. She rose, startled by the pounding of hoofs. Her eyes widened, her lips parted in an unvoiced query when Tanglefoot lurched from the saddle, and staggered toward her. She could see that his eyes were red from glare and dust, that he was shaky from pounding leather, that his horse was worn out. He tripped over a furrow, clawed the dirt, and lay there, gasping.

"Breck!" She knelt beside him. "What's happened? Where's dad? Where are the others?"

"None of them got away. Only me."

He struggled to his knees. For once his stumbling and faltering helped instead of hindering him. She cried out, and for a moment, clung to him for support. "Is dad —?"

"He's alive. Hurt bad. Got to get a wagon. To bring him."

He gasped out a story of trail cutters, a disastrous stampede, of men shot or trampled.

"Where is he? Oh, Lord, if we only had a doctor in Dos Palos!"

"Over yonder." He gestured. "That gang, the one we shot up last time, they laid for us. Me and him got away, but his hoss busted a leg. They thought they finished him, only they didn't. Not quite."

He hitched his tired horse to the tail of the buckboard. When Rosemary came running from the house with bandages, and supplies, he boosted her bodily to the seat, and picked up the reins. Just another occasion for crude, frontier surgery; she had seen plenty of that, and she was ready for it. It was just a case of getting there in time.

Tanglefoot whipped the team. The clatter of the wagon kept Rosemary from asking any further questions.

He knew the way; he had studied the ground, day after day, and now he could make it by night, over patches of lava, across stretches of baked clay, rattling down arroyos, and over grazing land. It was close to dawn when he pulled up at the foot of a butte that rose, steep and rocky. Around its base was a mantle of crumbling fragments; near its top was a mud walled cliff dwelling.

Tanglefoot pulled up. "We scrambled up that way, and begun shooting out through the loopholes, and they knowed they couldn't smoke us out, so they give it up."

He seized the bundle of supplies and bandages, caught Rosemary's hand, and went up the steep slope. Then came the trail, narrow, twisting; there were half obliterated steps which the aborigines had cut into the rock, centuries before the first white men had heard of New Mexico. Rosemary paused, breathless.

"Anyone up there ought to be safe enough," she gasped.

"Ladder ahead."

She followed him up the final ascent, fifty feet. "How'll we get him down from here? How on earth did he get up here?"

"Just like you and me. Wasn't hit real bad till right at the top." Tanglefoot explained. "Getting down, well, I don't know, may have to tend him here till he can climb down."

He was amazed at his own smoothness. It must be someone else speaking; it could not be Breckinridge Coleman. The inner self of him had become a spectator, watching the crazy doings of a lanky, clumsy man who led the way up a ladder which in that dry air had lasted for centuries after the last cliff dweller's disappearance.

Rosemary's anxiety and fatigue kept her from seeing anything odd about this inaccessible hideout. Everything was simple. . . .

ONCE on the shelf, he gave her a hand. A vague shape in the gray murk, she stared into the deeper gloom of the cavern beyond the *dobe* walls. Far inside, water trickled. A small spring had made this a stronghold in time of siege; and in the old days, it had been part of the cliff dwellers' irrigation system. With cords and jars, they had hoisted water to the top of the high mesa and its rows of corn.

"Where's dad?"

Tanglefoot lit one of the candles he took from the pack. He did not speak until the wide-eyed girl repeated, "Where's dad?"

"Driving cow critters. Don't you worry about him."

He was calm, now that the moment was here. His hand did not shake when he set the candle on a ledge. A yellow circle of light revealed the litter, the rubbish of centuries, the film of dust broken only by a few fresh footprints. Rosemary stared at him, and then all about her.

"You mean dad isn't here, wasn't hurt?"

"I came back for you, and here we are."

"Are you crazy?"

"Figure I must be." Then, as she recoiled a pace. "I ain't hurting you, honey. We're just here, you and me. With food and water. Nothing to break in while I tell you what I got to say."

"So that's why you came back?" Her voice was steady now, for she was facing something which she could understand. "And you always acted so bashful."

"That's why. No matter what I'd said to you back home, you'd 'ave laughed, or you'd had me run off the Diamond F. I'm right, too. You ain't laughing."

Rosemary regarded him with wonder rather than terror. "I never guessed, but this is crazy, Breck! Let's go back home before anyone misses me. I won't laugh at you."

There was no sign of terror or hysteria. His own uncanny calmness was contagious. He looked toward the entrance, saw that dawn was purple, far down below, and pinched out the candle wick. He sat down with his back against the ancient *dobe* door jamb, then said, "This here is too wonderful to break. Just you and me and nobody else. It still don't seem real, only it is. We got food and water, and we're way up on top of the

world."

The horses were restless; the wagon clattered a little as they browsed about. Rosemary heard the sound and came toward the entrance. "We ought to be leaving, Breck."

He caught the head of the ladder, and tipped it back. It upset, and crashed to the shelf, far below. "Ain't no way to leave now, honey."

A choked cry, and her legs buckled. He scrambled to his feet, and managed to catch her before she dropped to the hard floor. Then he let her slide through his arms, and to the bundle of rations and blankets she had brought for a man who was not wounded.

She lay there, motionless and silent so long that he wondered what had happened. Finally, her shoulders began to shake from sobbing. Tanglefoot seated himself at the further wall, his long arms wrapped about his knees. He was trying to think of all the things he had planned to say, but they had evaporated.

CHAPTER VI

The Rope Ladder

THE long day finally ended. Once Rosemary drank from the canteen he had placed beside her, but she would not eat, not even when the smell of frying bacon filled the cavern. And she refused the coffee he made.

"Breck, there must be some way out, some way down," she began. "Let's leave. When the horses go back to the house, and the Smiths miss me, there'll be a search. They'll find us."

"Cy couldn't trail a prairie fire."

"But dad will come back. He can track us over lava beds or anything else. By then we'll be starved out."

"He can let a rope down from the top and snake you out," Tanglefoot admitted. "I wouldn't bring you up here to die."

"You've brought me up here to make a show of me."

He considered for a moment. He was still amazed how easily he had been answering. There was nothing fumbling about him, perhaps because there was no crowd of snickering spectators, no dancing to exaggerate natural ungainliness. Bringing Rosemary up here was the equivalent of all the smooth nonsense and catchy things the other fellows glibly whispered to the girls back home; the sprightly bits which Tanglefoot always mangled, until he felt silly even before he opened his mouth. For the first time in his life, he had expressed himself without floundering, so after due thought, he said, "It wasn't to make a show of you. The first time I saw you, I was so fussed up from thinking things I couldn't say that I couldn't tell beans from sugar."

She actually smiled; sombrely, yet it was a smile. She nodded, recollection and understanding. Rosemary didn't hate him; he was sure of that now.

"You planned all this for days, didn't you?"

"For weeks, ever since that shooting scrape."

"Oh!" She flared up, eyes flashing, head high. "Just because you saved dad's herd, you think you can bring me up here and—"

"Wouldn't expect him to trade thattaway. Nor you either."

"Breck, he will trail us. Maybe he'll not believe I didn't do this on purpose, but you know what'll happen to you? Didn't you think of that?"

"Sure, I thought of it. He can shoot all he pleases. Or I'll stay here and eat rocks. He'll believe you didn't come here a-purpose."

He poured another mug of coffee.

"Give me some," Rosemary asked.

He handed her the cup and rolled a cigarette. She went to the ledge, looked down, shrank back from the dizzying brink. He said, "Ain't a chance of climbing down. You got to wait. Just you and me."

"Oh, you fool, you can't make me believe you planned a suicide. He'll shoot you; they'll hang you to a wagon tongue."

TANGLEFOOT sighed. "Them rustlers I shot, they tried anyway. Me, I never tried anything in my life, I always been too scairt. Now I'd ruther get shot for trying than to go around all my life feeling like a fool for standing around and gawking. I been the funniest clown in Dry Prong—they called me Tanglefoot—the whole town mocked me ever since I was a kid. You begin to understand?"

She sat down on the rocks beside him. "I think I do. But this is such a crazy thing. Last night, at the house, you could have . . . well, told me how you felt. There wasn't anyone around, not for ten miles."

"You'da told me I was a fool! This way, you ain't laughed. You understand? You're still not laughing, the first time I ever got within a yard of any girl without her mocking me with her eyes if she didn't snicker behind my back."

He jumped up, shook his fist at the doorway. "I'm ready any time your dad trails us. For once I ain't been Tanglefoot. You can hate me, you can say I'm crazy, but you ain't laughed. Like Glenn Irwin, like them cow thieves, I tried anyway."

He turned from her, and started toward the further room of that ancient house on the ledge. Rosemary said, "Breck."

The softness, the friendliness of her voice shocked him. He faced her, blinked in the dimming light, trying to read her expression. She had become a white blur; throat and bosom, and the curve of her legs, the contour of her arms as she embraced her knees—all these were now a feminine shape, the alluring shape of all women, rather than the loveliness of just one. And it seemed that it was her voice which worked the magic to transform one weary and disheveled girl into Ida Jordan's unforgotten essence of beauty.

For a moment it was as if Ida were there; Ida, the supreme prize for whom he had risked this crazy attempt.

"Breck," Rosemary repeated. "You said you *tried*. But you didn't, really. You didn't paw me, you didn't get rough."

He took a step toward her, and a second. The cavern seemed floored with air. "You'da hated me, and that'd been worse than you laughing."

He sat down beside her because his legs had begun to wobble. His

head was spinning, and his pulse was thumping wildly; not from her words, but from the shadings of her voice. He caught her in his arms, and she did not draw back. He found her upturned mouth; its warm pressure, that half-choked gasp of eagerness told him that it did pay to try. . . .

Kisses ended in breathlessness. When Rosemary finally stirred in his arms, she murmured, "Breck, this is like something in a book, the one I was reading a couple weeks ago, it kept me awake all night. The way you've risked your life, I mean. Now when dad trails us, I'll go up first, I'll persuade him. I'll sneak out nights and let food down to you, from the top. He'll finally cool down, and you can come out. I'll convince him that shooting you wouldn't really fix anything. That I've got to have you alive and with me, always."

She was actually saying that. Tanglefoot's whirling brain was dividing into two portions; in one, the past incredible hours were dancing; in the other, Bird Cage Annie's advice echoed.

"Get that fire going, Breck, so I can fry some bacon, I'm dreadfully hungry. . . ."

He tore out a few of the ancient cottonwood rafters and broke them up. Soon the blaze was crackling again.

WHEN Rosemary had eaten, Tanglefoot said ,"There ain't going to be any scandal a-tall, honey. The hosses can't be far away, I half-hobbled 'em, and there's water near, so they ain't gone home. And by daylight, you can find your way back, easy, or they can, anyway. You see, I just lit out from the trail herd, nobody's got the least idea where I headed for. I'll come back with a good story."

"But Breck—" She looked up, bewildered. "We can't get down. Didn't I look? I didn't take your word for it, I looked while you dozed, a couple times."

He struck a match, and went far back into the cavern. He came back with a rope ladder he had made, weeks previous, and hidden under a rock. "Look here. We can get out, right now. The hosses'll find the way home for you."

She rose, very slowly. Her queer little smile was twisted and bitter. "Oh. You contemptible skunk! You weren't risking a thing—you didn't get rough with me—no—you just —stole—tricked—made me think—you loved me—enough to face dad —when he found us—"

He looked her in the eye. "Nothing I can say. This here rope proves you're speaking gospel."

One long, deadly glance. She turned her back. "Fix up the ladder, and don't wait for me. I don't want to see you. I don't want you to see me again."

He did not answer, and he did not glance over his shoulder when she walked into the further room.

It was only a minute's work, fastening the rope ladder to a cottonwood beam, which in its turn he set athwart the doorway. There was no sound from above when he started the fifty foot descent.

As he had told Rosemary, the horses had not strayed far. He drove the wagon to the foot of the talus. Then, in the saddle, he rode east.

Confidence rode with him. Ida Jordan had been sweet to other awkward fellows at the dance that night in Dry Prong, and when he returned, she would listen to him.

CHAPTER VII

Proof of the Pudding

UNGAINLY as ever, Tanglefoot was back at the harness maker's bench. The noise of the buffalo gun which had saved the Diamond F trail herd had finally reached Dry Prong, though it was his own new confidence which made the town laugh with and not at him.

Todd Hill slapped him on the back. "Tanglefoot, that high-nosed Jordan gal sure was taken down a peg when you blatted out about her not pulling the shades."

He twisted the awl. "Shucks, I was too fussed up to think of what I was saying. Is she really high-nosed and uppity?"

"We-l-l, sorta, her old man being important. But it's the women folks that done the damage. The poor critter's practically never outen the hotel, she's jest counting the days till her pappy finishes that whopping ranch house. She allus did despise this town."

Tanglefoot glanced up at the window of grand revelation. "Bet a crowd of the boys hand around. What's she care about the women?"

"Nuh-uh. She's too dang embarrassed to show herself anywhere. If it warn't for your rep as a gun fighter, I'd be advising you to stay outa town."

Tanglefoot glanced at the clock. "Reckon I'm quitting a bit early."

"Aain't getting all prettied up for the dance at the Oddfeller's Hall, are you?"

"Can't never tell."

That evening, Tanglefoot knocked at Ida's door.

"So you're back," she said, bitterly. "Who else have you embarrassed with your blundering?"

That did not shake him. He was thinking of a cliff dwelling, and wondering what she would have done and said in Rosemary's place. "Some folks just ain't handy with their wits, Miss Ida. I'm sure sorry they're all mocking you."

She tried to slam the door, but his big foot blocked that move. He twisted past the jamb, and looked about the room. The air was sweet with costly scents exhaled by the sachets in the dresser. A closet, half open, revealed an alluring array of frilly gowns; silk hose hung in a shimmering length over the back of a chair.

From across the plaza came the whine of violins, the laughter of women, the joyous whooping of cowpunchers. Ida watched him cross the room and step to the front window. Finally she flared up, "Will you get out of here! Or do you insist on embarrassing me again, making me call for the manager?"

He turned from the window. "Sure sounds festive. Every gal in Dry Prong is kicking up her heels. And you, with all them pretty duds, staying to home."

He sat down. The rocker creaked under his weight. Ida clenched her fists and said in helpless fury, "Oh, if my father hadn't gone out to the ranch tonight!"

THE music mocked her, and so did his placid silence. She flung herself face down on the bed and cried into her pillow, "Can't you leave me alone! I wasn't the only one who laughed at you that night, everybody else did, I couldn't help it. Haven't you evened things up enough, telling—this whole town—how you'd seen me—?"

He rose, and laid a hand on her bare shoulder. "I'm sure sorry. You can believe me, I am; I been mocked all my life. I know how it is."

She twisted about, and sat up, with a flurry of legs and lace and a rustling of silk. The blue gown parted to expose the filmy garment beneath, lustrous and clinging from garter clasp to bosom. "Take your paws off me! I don't want any of your sympathy; I don't want any of your apologies! Just because you shot Glenn Irwin and routed some rustlers, you needn't think you look a bit better to me, you big clown!"

He drew up a chair. "You listen for your own good. I seen your eyes were red when I busted in. You're letting them do you just the way they done me, all my life. I come back account a laugh don't bother me, not any more."

She eyed him, curiously, forgetting her indignation. "You don't quite sound or look like the Tanglefoot of that night."

"I'm something new. If I went over to the Oddfellers, I bet someone'd dance with me, and if I tromped on her feet, she'd not act up any worse'n when it was someone else."

"You are changed. Why? You look just as gawky but you're different."

A strange thrill shook him. He had her listening, just the way Rosemary had at last begun to listen. He answered, "I just waded in and faced things."

"What sort of things."

He smiled a little, shook his head. "Oh, just things."

"Tell me," Ida urged, laying a hand on his shoulder.

She was so close now that her gleaming curls brushed his cheek. He could smell the warm fragrance exhaled by the silk that clung to her lovely figure, that same white wonder that had dazzled him, driven him to making a fool of himself.

"I went to that dang dance account of you, that night. Hadn't been up there since the fust time. I got flustered. Now you and me have got to go."

"You went up on my account? You didn't even know me."

"But I seen you. Just far enough away so you looked like everything wonderful rolled into one. I got crazy and desperate. Now I'll wait outside, you hurry and dress."

He rose, but she clung to his arm. "You've still not told all that you did. Was it a girl?"

"I can't *tell* you." He drew her toward him with a sudden enveloping move. "But I can show you."

She gasped from the suddenness of his embrace. She tried to break clear for a moment, as he kissed her mouth and her smooth throat. For a moment, he was appalled by his daring, and then he began to understand. Bird Cage Annie was right . . . that meeting in the cliff dwelling had left a mark on him, had left an effect that would not wear off. An elaborate planned

ambush for Rosemary—and now, just self confidence.

"Tanglefoot," she gasped, "are you crazy—or am I—?"

But she returned his kisses, and answered her own query.

LATER, he said, "Honey, you better fix up for that dance, your hair is all mussed up, and it's getting late.

He took a chair out into the hall. He bent over, buried his face in his hands, and closed his eyes.

He could not keep his mind off that cliff dwelling. There, he had faced a peril he could not face a second time. He knew now that he had returned, not for Ida, but for an *idea;* not a woman, but rather, beauty glorified by remoteness and distance.

The door opened. Ida came out, smiling and starry eyed. She took his arm, and whispered, "I've been a ninny. As if it makes any difference what these funny small town women think."

Head high, she passed the door keeper. There was a general rush. Women were left sitting along the wall. Ida laughed and said, "Oh, do give me a chance to hang up my cape!"

Tanglefoot fumbled for his gun, and passed it to the postmaster. He stayed at the door, shaking his head. The postmaster was saying, "Gosh, how'd you talk her outa hiding? You ain't even scratched."

He did not answer; he was watching Ida, and telling himself that she was a total stranger, a beautiful creature so self conscious that just one lout's blurted indiscretion had upset her. More than that, she despised the town, yet she was eager to dazzle it. Though what really made her so strange and unreal to him was his memory of Rosemary, hanging out the washing, pulling radishes, feeding the chickens; Rosemary, up there in the cliff dwelling, drinking coffee and eating bacon. Ida had been mirage, glamour, fascination distantly viewed by one who had never had reality in his arms, but now had new eyes, new senses.

Even if Ida did not repent her impulsive outburst, it still made no difference. He should have stayed in that cliff dwelling. Tanglefoot turned to the postmaster and said, "Gimme my gun."

"I be damned." He took the ponderous Colt from the peg. "Say, there's a letter for you, just come in on the eastbound stage."

"Where from?"

"Dos Palos. A gal's handwriting."

"I got to get it now. Where's your keys?"

"Place ain't locked. Go right in."

Tanglefoot raced across the plaza.

He barged through the back door of the general store, and into the corner partitioned off from the rest of the building. He struck a match, and found the letter.

It was from Rosemary, and there was just one line: *"Nobody suspects a thing, and I'm homesick for our cliff house."*

He saddled up, and as he rode among the *jacales,* he pulled up at Bird Cage Annie's shack. He tapped at her window. When she came out, cursing and mumbling, he gave her a handful of silver.

"Get good and drunk. This time, I ain't coming back."

Girls With Guns

(Continued from page 41)

long skirt her ankles were trim, and the skin revealed under the torn bodice was a milky white with the same dewy sheen of the Hell-Cat's ivory-tinted body. Curt took her arms, from which her sleeves had been ripped, and shook her gently.

"Look here, miss I ain't no right to interfere in a strange lady's troubles, like I already found out tonight. But it ain't natural I should leave you here after you telling me somebody takes his pleasure mistreating you."

THE girl studied his face. Slowly her sobbing died away. "He —Blinky Mack beat me because I wouldn't do the things Newt Krang wants me to do. Blinky Mack is my uncle. I'm Ellen Mack and he's the only relative I've got. I ran out of the building—to get away from him. Now — I'm ashamed to go back, like this."

She tried to draw her torn bodice across her breasts and upper body, but too much had been torn away.

Suddenly she said, "You can't help me, I've no place to go but here with him. He makes me sing and play the piano for the dancing and tries to make me listen to Newt Krang, but you can't help me." Abruptly she was passionately earnest. "But I can help you. You mustn't let them guide you in the morning. Newt will have you killed. There is a bitter war on between the Bar-Y and the Circle Cross. You mustn't go to the Bar-Y at all. It's the crookedest and most dangerous outfit above the border. Even the law and Newt Krang is afraid of it now and you'll never know when the Hell-Cat will turn on you and kill you. She kills any one who doesn't please her."

"The Hell-Cat?"

The girl looked up at him with surprise in her eyes. "Didn't you know? Jane Ladlaw? She turned into a wild demon since Newt drove her father away. She rules the range now, with the renegade gunmen. And she takes what she wants from all the ranges." She paused to put her hands on Curt's shoulders. Her face came close. Her breasts rose and fell with her emotion beneath their scanty lace covering.

"I watched you through the window. I know you're not bad even if you are a gunman. And you'd help me if you could. Please—I don't want you to run the risks you'd have to on the Bar-Y."

She'd raised her voice in her eagerness. The huge bulk of Newt Krang came out from the dance hall and around the building. Both the girl and Curt were so intent upon each other that neither saw until the rancher was upon them.

He shoved past Curt, reached a heavy paw for the girl, jerked her around and sent her staggering with a slap in the face. He called her a foul name. "Playing high-toned lady with me and meeting this jasper out here in the dark and playing loose with him!"

He swung upon Curt. His gun

was already out and coming up. The girl screamed. Curt didn't wait to draw. His left hand swept in a semi circle, knocking Krang's gun aside. At the same instant his hard fist crashed with a mighty impact under the big fellow's jaw, grounding him in a half strangled heap. While he was going down, Curt kicked his gun out of his hand and then his own came out and his voice was as hard as his fist. "Get up, mister. I'm not shooting you for a skunk, you not having your gun. But I'm mashing your face in soon as you're on your skunk's feet."

He would have carried out his threat while the frightened girl cringed against the wall, but on a clatter of hoofs three riders pulled up at the hitch rack, sliding from their leather while they threw reins over the wooden rail.

THE fore feet of one pony narrowly missed pawing the big bulk of Newt Krang while he scrambled to his feet. The first thing Curt noticed was that all three riders slid to ground with drawn guns. The second thing that cut through to his consciousness was that the rider who dropped from the pony that had so narrowly missed the scrambling Krang, was Jane Ladlaw — the Hell-Cat!

She gave an exclamation when she recognized Krang and both of her guns pointed at him when he was on his feet. "I came to see you, Newt Krang," her cool voice said. "It's sure polite of you to be welcoming me outside."

Curt waited in the shadows, close to the cowering Ellen Mack. Whatever this visit was, it would be none of his business. He remembered that the girl he'd come to help was the Hell-Cat and she had proved she could help herself.

When she saw him, she gave a sound between her teeth and stepped close, leaving her companions to cover both Krang and Curt. She saw the girl, her almost bare body shining white through the shreds of her dress. Jane Ladlaw's lips curled at Curt.

"Because you knew you couldn't have me, back there on the range, no more than Blackie could, you found somebody else! And in such a hurry!" Abruptly Jane Ladlaw laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant laugh. She edged close to Ellen Mack and deliberately tore the remnants of her dress from her. Curt moved but a pair of gun noses were thrust into his belly by one of the Hell-Cat's gunmen.

Ellen Mack sobbed her protest while she tried to cover herself with arms and hands. The white garment around her hips was scarcely a covering. Below it her trembling thighs were gleaming white columns that tapered to graceful calves. The Hell-Cat laughed again.

"So you found Newt Krang's girl and found her soft, which is more than Krang ever did, I'm told. And he stole into your round-up, which must have been a sight for his damned rattlesnake's eyes."

She laughed again, while Ellen Mack sobbed her denials with Curt snapping in to tell the Hell-Cat she was lying. This laugh was full in Krang's snarling face. She faced him, guns thrust in front of her. Her voice turned steel again.

"I came into Loose End to tell you, Newt Krang, that I'm driving a herd across your range to the Border. I'm not waiting for night but I'm taking it across in broad daylight. And I'm warning you that my riders will pick up any beef that crosses their trail. I'm warning you more than that. I'm ready to meet any of your lobos as would like to get in my way and I'll throw their dirty corpses under the herd's feet. I'm telling you beforehand because I'm hoping I get a chance to wipe out some more of your yellow-livered desert rats."

She stood again in front of Ellen Mack, her feet spread apart, her red lips curling. She whirled abruptly upon Curt and sneered, "She won't be so white and pretty for you after Newt Krang gets through with her."

She leaped into her saddle then. Ponies far apart, to avoid a bunched bulk if Curt or Krang should take a notion to shoot, the three riders disappeared in the street's darkness, hoofs pounding toward the range.

ELLEN MACK began to sob again, seeing herself in a worse plight than ever. Newt Krang had caught her with Curt and his evilly jealous mind had come to the obvious conclusion. Curt picked up Krang's gun, whirled the cylinder and emptied it, and tossed it at Krang's feet.

"I'm taking the girl with me," he snapped. "You nor her uncle will get at her tonight. What she wants to do later will be her saying so."

Krang cursed and threatened. Curt struck him down once more and, while he floundered, Curt lifted the scarcely protesting girl into his saddle. He forked her behind him. Her body was soft and warm pressed against his while she clung to her seat by wrapping her bare arms around him.

When they came to the end of the street, she asked, "Where can you take me? There's no place I'll be safe from Uncle Blinky and Newt."

"There's one place, if you'll tell me how to get there. The Bar-Y. That's where we're going."

She gave a cry. Her body clung even closer to his. "Not to the Bar-Y. The Hell-Cat hates me because she thinks I'll have to be Newt's girl some day. And now—after tonight—she will hate me worse than ever."

"Why after tonight, ma'am?"

"I saw the look in her eyes when she thought you — when she thought I had been favoring you and Newt had caught us. I saw when she looked at you."

"You're talking plumb loco, ma'am," Curt exclaimed. "I never saw the she-coyote till tonight."

"One seeing is enough for some women. She would scratch me all over. She wanted to tonight."

"Just the same we'll go to the Bar-Y. It's where I was headed for and I finish my trails. If she's taking the herd south herself, she won't be there. Whoever's at the spread won't know what's happened tonight, and I have the right to tell them I was her father's best friend. I haven't had the chance to tell her, yet. You've got to have some clothes. We'll get them there."

She was still fearful but made no more protests. It was ten miles to the Bar-Y home buildings, across a straight pony path. Ellen Mack said, "You can't take me into the yards this way—I'm almost nude!"

WHEN they sighted the brown roofs of the main houses, Curt dismounted and lifted her down from the saddle. Close to the path was a clump of greasewood and he left her there, safely hidden. When he turned back to his horse, the girl timidly touched his arm and brought him back. "I'd like to kiss you," she whispered. "Just once. Maybe there won't be another chance or maybe you won't want to kiss me some other time."

His arms went around her gratefully, straining her to him, pressing her breasts flat to his chest, his mouth finding her cactus blossom lips and setting fire to them as surely as dry grass leaps into flame. She gave a little moan when she took her lips away. She smiled wistfully. "The Hell-Cat would surely kill me if she saw us just then. She won't ever let you hold me that way again, after you've seen her once more."

THE home yards were almost deserted except for stock in the house corral, and mustangs and pintos standing lazily in the sun within the stable yard. An old Chinese cook watched Curt sleepily from the cook house, and an old woman came onto the porch. At the bunk house some half a dozen yard hands and bronc wranglers were whittling. They got up when they saw the lone horseman and shuffled toward him, their movements suspicious. Curt figured that Jane Ladlaw had taken nearly all of her outfit and its best gunmen along with her herd, leaving only the necessary yard help.

The old woman looked him over when he drew up to the porch. She said sullenly, "What you want, cowboy? Strangers don't come 'round here often."

Curt told her briefly that he had come to find Jane Ladlaw and that he came from her father. The old woman's manner changed. "She'll sure be glad to hear from Matt Ladlaw, as was driven off by Newt Krang. She sure grieves fer him. Me, too, I worked on this spread for Matt Ladlaw from young woman to old crone like I am now. But she ain't here. She won't be here for nigh a week."

"Maybe you'll make me welcome to rest a spell," Curt hinted, and he told her about the girl waiting in the greasewood for some clothes to put on.

The old woman was dubious. "I ain't likin' that. That Ellen Mack is got to be Newt Krang's girl and Jane hates the guts of her. But maybe—seein' as you come from Matt Ladlaw. She'd want to do what would please her father."

The old woman brought some clothes, a dress and a handful of white lacy things that Curt knew would belong to the Hell-Cat. He took them to the greasewood and waited outside until Ellen stepped out, as he hadn't seen her before, her slenderly curved body fully covered. He sighed. "You looked more appealing, ma'am, before."

She smiled. "I mustn't be appealing to you."

From the old woman Curt learned how the quiet and gentle Jane Ladlaw had turned into a Hell-Cat when her father was driven out. She wouldn't leave the ranch to be gobbled up by the Krangs, and had deliberately set about gathering the worst blacklegs from the badlands and below the border. So ruthless had she been that Newt Krang had learned to be afraid of her and her gunslicks.

Boldly she held onto whatever of the Krang cattle that strayed onto the Bar-Y and those that mixed into the herds when she drifted them over the Circle Cross. Fighting her way, she carried along, defying the Circle Cross riders. "But it can't go on," the old woman sighed. "If she don't let up, them Krangs will find a way to beat her down some day. She ought to be tamed."

CURT left until the next day to make his decision whether to ride after the herd and get her father's message to the Hell-Cat, or wait until she returned. And he had to decide about Ellen Mack.

His decision was made for him while he slept. In the morning Ellen Mack's bed was empty. Covers strewn across the floor showed that she had been dragged from the bed, her screams stopped some way. Curt missed ponies from the stable corral, and the bunk house was ominously still at a time of morning when the yard hands should be coming out to grub.

He ran into the cook house and there found the Chinese cook, sputtering through a gag, rolling on the floor with his hands and feet bound with latigos.

The frightened Chinese's news was that one of the herd riders had come back to the spread during the night, 'roused the yard hands and reported that the Hell-Cat's blacklegs had turned on her. The Chink had overheard the low talk in the bunkhouse. The blacklegs had taken her prisoner at an unguarded moment and were carrying her across the border where they would sell her into some Mexican dive.

They planned to deliver the herd just the same and split among themselves the $6000 she expected to receive at the border station where she was accustomed to turn her herds over to the Mexican buyers.

The home spread hands that had been left behind immediately rode south to join their fellows—and since two girls would sell in Mexico for twice what one would bring, they carried Ellen Mack with them.

Curt saddled and took to the range. The old woman knew the herd's trail.

"It brings the beef into the La Palomas Pass, twelve miles this side of the meeting place where she always delivers her herds. The Mexicans will meet it there."

"Can I get around the pass and head off the herd?"

"Follow High Trail across the mountains. It's shorter and carries you over the Pass. The stock can't travel it."

The lone rider, carbine in his saddle flap, twin Colts holstered loose along either thigh, galloped through the Pass a full night before the slow moving herd was due.

At dawn, his long legged pony refreshed, he examined every yard of the deep canyon and scanned the towering walls. Sure footed, the pony climbed a narrow footpath from the far end of the Pass to a promontory that once had been an Indian sentinel post guarding the pass below. Agave, mesquite, and mountain cactus screened the flat floor of the promontory.

Here, close to the unreaching walls behind, Curt ground-hitched the pony with the soft words that, he knew, would keep the animal still no matter what roar of horses, men, and steers should fill the ravine. And that roar would soon be rising, for Curt was hardly settled behind his screen when the rumble of hoofs reached into the opening of the narrow Pass.

THE herd came on, milling, scrambling for floor space, thinning out into a long line of nervous cattle. Not for a time could Curt, peering between the brush, make out the leading herd guards. Only a few would be in front of the herd, he knew, and none running the sides, for there was no side room. At last he counted six ponies, dark nimble shapes well in front of the herd. At first one of those ponies seemed to have no riders, then Curt made out two shapes, bent over the pony's back on their stomachs, legs drawn tight around the animal's belly on one side, arms drawn tight around the side, and hands and ankles bound to each other by straps beneath.

Both shapes were white in the glistening morning sun. He knew who they would be. Jane Ladlaw and Ellen Mack. Ellen still wore her night dress, torn and flying in the wind, blown up high above her knees. Jane Ladlaw wore her boy's trousers, but her shirt had been torn from her. Her cruelly bent back was a bare expanse of rosy flesh.

At thirty yards Curt began to sight his carbine, first on one pony then another. Five true shots and there would be only one pony laden and flying before a startled herd.

Twenty yards. The first explosion echoed above the clamor of the herd. The renegade toppled, and his head dragged on the ground as his frightened animal leaped ahead. Before the first echo had beaten through the consciousness of the other leaders, the carbine sent a whining slug to a second of the blacklegs. Curt knew he had hit him, for he saw him bend over his pommel, but he didn't wait to watch.

Already guns were barking from behind the herd. Guns whose flames reached for the sound of the shots ahead, and sent their searching slugs far wild, as Curt knew they would until his own gunsmoke began to lift above the brush that screened him.

The two remaining riders spurred their ponies away from the rapidly stampeding herd. One reached across with his quirt and stung the flanks of the animal that carried the two helpless girls. This pony screamed and shot out of the Pass onto the open flats of sage desert. Curt was glad of this maneuver. It carried the captives out of range.

He had time only to sight on the back of one of the fleeing gunmen

before his smoke began to lift and make him a target for the rider directly below and those trying to crowd through the cattle from behind.

This one went down under his horse and an instant later horse and man were being trampled by a hundred sets of hoofs.

Curt gave a shout of triumph while he threw himself across his saddle until his mount was sliding down the path to the flats. Safe from that revealing smoke, he sat upright, Colts ready. When he emerged on the flat, the last of the lead riders was galloping across the desert in the wake of the fleeing pony that bore the girls. He turned in his saddle to answer Curt's first shot, answered the second, then he too toppled over and his pony began to run wild.

When the last of the cattle milled out of the Pass releasing the rear guard riders to the desert, neither Curt nor the captives' pony were in sight of the frenzied gunmen.

"It's a ten mile ride from here," the Hell-Cat said, when Curt had caught and released the captives, "to the station, an adobe house, where the Mexicans will come to get the herd. They'll take my side if my blacklegs have the nerve to show up now, which they won't. We'll make it there. If they let the herd go, we'll have to round it up."

There wasn't much said during the ride. Only every so often the Hell-Cat stole a side look at Curt and looked back over her shoulder at Ellen Mack, who was forked behind her. They made the adobe station by noon. The Mexicans had not arrived.

ONCE again Ellen Mack's slender white body needed clothes and worse than before, because the night dress had been her only covering and this was ripped and torn hopelessly. She held it together in front, and that was the best she could do.

The Hell-Cat seemed unconscious of her condition, her bruised body bare from her hips up save for the shred of white that still clung to her breasts.

On the ride across the flats Curt had told Jane Ladlaw his news of her father, and of his own promise to Matt Ladlaw to come and help. All she said then was, "Father's gone—I don't need the ranch any more."

There was grub cached in the adobe hut. The Hell-Cat still was mostly silent, apparently brooding over the ignominy she'd gone through. But Ellen Mack seemed to think it wasn't brooding over that. Her eyes never left Jane Ladlaw's face, and there was a strange fear in them. When Curt went out to bring in water and left the two girls alone she reached out a hand as if to stop him, then withdrew it that she might hold her revealing night dress together.

Abruptly a scream from inside the house cut the air. Curt ran in. Jane Ladlaw had backed Ellen Mack into a corner and was standing before her with threatening fists and nails ready to claw.

"You'll not have him," the Hell-Cat was crying in fury. "I'll kill you. I'm the Hell-Cat, and I'll tear you to pieces if you say you want him—or get him!"

Curt jerked her away, taking

her by her bare shoulders. She wheeled to claw and beat him, and slapped him back, but he picked her up and carried her, kicking furiously, to a bunk. He dropped her on the mattress and from his boot pulled his own quirt. While the girl fought and fumed, he ruthlessly rolled her onto her face and the quirt whistled through the air to lay a blue line across the bare quivering back.

"Oh, don't!" Ellen Mack cried. "And tell her that you don't want me. Tell her it's her you want—and you do, for I've looked in your eyes too. For me there will be somebody else."

"I'll talk to her about that," Curt said harshly, "when I've tamed her. I'll take charge of the ranch, from now on, and I'll run that straight—and run her straight too."

For a moment the Hell-Cat lay still, her tortured breath coming in shuddering gasps. Now it was Curt who slapped impatiently against his boots with his quirt.

Then she spoke without turning over.

"I want him to run the ranch—straight, now that father's been avenged. And run me straight. But he tamed me—when he took me in his arms, on the range!"

Mexican Mission

(Continued from page 49)

noise she made was drowned by the ribaldry in the rooms downstairs.

"You?" gasped a voice from the bed. "Oh, I thought—"

"Yo' can save it!" rasped Doc. "This ain't the time or place!"

Señora Robla had been neatly roping Nora Harnes. The waist and skirt that had been torn by the ruthless hands of Diablo Morez concealed but little of the range girl's entrancing contours. Doc bit off a curse as he saw a livid welt across the soft curve of the girl's back.

He used the knife and Nora Harnes sat erect, pulling the skirt into place. Her silk-clad legs were slender and although they lacked the maturity of Dolores' sleek ones, yet they tapered in sculptured perfection to the slimness of dainty ankles.

"We've got t' high-tail outta here!" grated Doc. "When that fat hellion on the floor wakes up, she'll raise the roof!"

Nora was staring from Doc to Dolores.

"You risked yourself to help me, honey?" she said unbelievingly. "I didn't believe your kind—"

"Shut up!" snapped Doc. "Yo' got gall t' say that! An' what the blazes an' all is Bucko Harnes' gal herself when she's gentlin' up to that snake Morez below the line? Yo' ain't—"

"*Señor* Smeeth, please," interrupted Dolores, her brown hand on his arm. "She is speak the truth. Don't say what weel make you sorree. We must get out weeth the Americana *señorita* pronto!"

Nora looked at the dancer, and her blue eyes suddenly went moist.

"But it's me that's sorry, hon-

ey," she cried out. "And your *Señor* Smith is right. He's one cowboy that's shootin' straight in handing me what he believes I've got coming. You're a darling and I ought to have my tongue cut out."

DOC REAGAN felt the blood mounting to his ears. Gals could swap directions faster than a sunfishin' bronk. But Dolores suddenly pinched his arm, sprang away and blew out the single oil lamp on a table. The heavy clumping of booted feet was coming along the hallway.

"Keep quiet!" cautioned Doc. "It's only one hombre! Be ready to get out, if yo' know the way, Dolores!"

"Stairs ees end of hall, *Señor* Smeeth," said Dolores quickly. "I weel help thees Nora. I weel wait at end of street by the reever."

The door started to open and the hallway light showed a bulky Mex. Doc had hoped it would be Morez, but it was another Mex. The hombre halted, his eyes probing the darkness. Doc launched himself from his toes. He could have used the knife, but it was his crossing fists that smashed hard into the Mex's face.

"Make it out!" ordered Doc as the Mex's big arms shot out and caught him in a bear hug.

He hit the hallway floor with the Mex. Half a minute later the bulky Mex was coughing blood and he had a few busted ribs. He hadn't been able to let out a single warning yell under Doc's short-punching fists.

DOC slid from the hallway, found a door, and went down outside stairs into the dark street. He passed behind 'dobe shacks and reached the end of a street down by the Rio.

He saw his black gelding tied under shore trees.

"Queek!" said the voice of Dolores in the darkness. "Take these! I have steal them from the cantina! *Señorita* Nora ees safe weeth my brother! She ees crazee! She weel not go away an' she says it ees she must see the bull fighteeng tomorrow! Kees me, *Señor* Smeeth!"

She had handed him his own smooth-butted six-guns from the bar.

Her warm, quivering lips stopped his speech. The black gelding pawed restlessly. Doc released her to quiet the horse. And she was gone like a ghost in the black shadows.

"Well, that's that!" said Doc harshly. "So Nora Harnes must see the bullfight? If she ain't plumb pizened with loco weed, then I'm a smelly sheepherder! Blackie, I'm stakin' yo' out, an' trustin' to blind luck! I'll be rollin' in my tarp out on the flats, an' Nora Harnes an' me will both be seein' a bull stickin'!"

Wedged into a narrow space above a box manger in the bullpen, Doc Reagan could see the few hundred Mex of the baking town of Quinta filling the board seats around the bullfighting ring. He cussed at the heat, and he cussed more at the stinking business he was watching.

A staggering, nearly exhausted bull was bellowing with pain. Darting picadors had baited the longhorn to blind madness. A brave fellow on a bone-racked old horse de-

liberately put the helpless nag in the bull's way. The bull rallied, rushed, and a horn ripped open the horse's belly.

The horse screamed and fell. Doc's sweating hands gripped the butts of his guns. The lousy, stinkin' greasers! He had all he could do to keep from starting his guns blazing. Bullets would be too quick and painless, to Doc's way of thinking about yellow-spined hombres who shouted their *vivas* over the brutal killing of a helpless old cayuse.

The strutting toreador approached now. His cloak was over one arm and it was a great show of his daring courage, judging by the yells of the crowd as he jabbed his gleaming short sticker to the heart of the blinded and weakened bull.

"Curse it!" groaned Doc. "If I could get me them hombres all tied together at the end of a lass rope, I'd drag their guts out like they done to that hoss!"

The slaughtered horse and the bull were dragged out. The ring was cleared. An announcer yelled through a tin megaphone. Cheering broke out. The great Diablo Morez was to come on next. Doc swore through clenched teeth.

For more than an hour his eyes had searched the bull ring seats. He was looking through a slit in the box where he was hidden. His gaze took in the lines of faces, but he did not see Nora Harnes.

"The crazy, little filly wouldn't dare take a chance on being in the crowd," he muttered. "But I've got an idea that when she says she's seein' a bullfight, that Nora Harnes is seein' a bullfight."

He thought possibly she might be hidden like himself. He had not seen Dolores today either, and he hadn't risked going near the cantina. He was sick with the heat, and sicker over the gnawing thought that Diablo Morez and the others of his band might have come upon the two girls. In case they had, Nora would be back with *Señora* Robla. But he couldn't go there either, or he hadn't.

But he was looking to his six-guns, and if he didn't see Nora before the bullfighting ended, Doc Reagan was going to forget all about being a ranger. At least long enough to show these Mex what one loco waddy could do with his shooting irons if he went on the prod.

And it was Diablo Morez that he wanted first. If he could get that snake-tongued greaser corraled somewhere alone, Doc bet he'd know all about several things, including the whereabouts of Nora and the cattle smuggling that had brought him below the line.

THE new bull was coming out. A big red fellow, with sharp, curving horns and a white face. Something about that bull held Doc's eye. The animal wasn't putting on the usual show of snorting and pawing. He moved with powerful but light steps, but he seemed as much at home as any of the nags under bridle and waiting for brutal death.

Vividly colored cloths were waved. Banderillos flashed in the quick hands of the baiting picadors. The red bull appeared only bewildered at the bite of the darts in his thick hide. Disappointed

shouts started in the board seats. *"Viva Diablo!"* had been sounding for Morez, who Doc now saw standing to one side, his crimson and yellow clothes making a gaudy picture. Now the *vivas* died out. A mounted baiter rode in close to the red bull and brutally prodded the point of a short sword at the animal's nose.

The blow brought the first rumbling bellow and the first pawing from the blaze-faced longhorn. At least there were limits to his mysterious good nature and tameness. He ran with a few short steps toward the horse and the rider who had torn his sensitive nose.

Diablo Morez must have been filled with disgust. He was talking volubly and waving both hands at some of the picadors. The crowd yelled. Then suddenly, Doc Reagan saw a slim, quick-moving fellow in gorgeous garments waving a red cloth and running lightly toward the bull.

The rounded, silver conchaed hat was pulled down tight over the young hombre's head. The waving cloth helped to conceal his face. Whether it was the waving cloth or his still smarting nose, the red bull turned. The crowd yelling, became breathless silence.

The bull was snorting, and his sweeping, pointed horns went low. He was suddenly hurling his more than half a ton of weight straight upon the daring picador. Even Diablo Morez was starting forward, shouting.

"Pig of a fool!" he was yelling in Mex. "You have not the sense—"

Doc wasn't listening to the rest of Morez's anathema. For the red cloth dropped from the picador's hands as an amazing leap was made. A roaring of voices became a combined groan. This was about to be worth their *dinero*.

No doubt but every hombre and every wide-eyed *señorita* expected to see a body impaled upon a horn and lifted. The slender body was lifted, but it was to one side of the murderous points. And the picador was leaping, a colorful leg flashing over the red bull's neck. Then the fellow was twisting a hand into the short, coarse hair of the animal's neck and leaning forward. A flaring trouser leg hiked up from a slim, beautiful leg.

"Great jehosophat!" yelled Doc Reagan, and he wasn't caring a hoot if he could be heard. "I'm loco for shore this time!"

The round hat of the picador had been swept off. Golden yellow hair tumbled down around slim shoulders. The white face of Nora Harnes appeared. Doc started squirming out of the box, one hand gripping an iron.

DIABLO MOREZ had halted, as if transfixed. His killing sword had come into his hand. He was well toward the middle of the bull ring. Then in an awed silence, the clear voice of Nora Harnes rang out.

"You, Morez! The great toreador! For the murder of my father!"

It was so incredible that Doc stood outside the box, hardly conscious he had one six-gun in his hand, aiming steadily at Morez, although too far away for a certain bead. Then the red bull was lunging forward and it looked as if

Nora Harnes was urging him, talking to him.

The words of Nora may have confused Diablo Morez, or he may not have heard or understood. There might well have been time for him to have run and dodged behind the shelter wall at one side. But there was a killer tenseness in his face, and as his red cloth swung from his left arm, he darted to meet the oncoming beast.

Doc heard Nora scream out something. And Doc would have triggered the six-gun then, but the girl's figure flashed between him and Morez. Perhaps scores of times Diablo Morez had lithely sidestepped a charging bull, then thrust his blade into its heart.

How far he may have sidestepped now, Doc could not see. But he did see the red bull change direction, swerve to one side in his thundering charge. That was something a maddened, dumb animal never had been seen to do in that bull ring. And Morez was striking with his sword, not at the bull, but at Nora Harnes.

One short, fear-filled scream of agony tore from the throat of Diablo Morez. It was like the animal scream of the horse that had been ripped along the belly. The great Morez had been ripped, too, through the flesh of his thigh. He was lifted and flung to one side.

Doc forgot about any danger to himself. A horror of screaming from the seats and a rush of his fellow bull baiters toward Morez covered the ranger's dash. Nora Harnes swayed on a plunging back, as Doc tried to get to the bull. He expected to see her hurled to the ground.

But the bull seemed to be controlled by Nora's voice. He thundered on toward an outer gate that was beginning to open. The gateway led to a short trail that went from the bull ring down to the shallow Rio Grande no more than a hundred yards or so away.

Doc's teeth clenched hard. A gun cracked behind him and dust fogged up as lead spatted close to his boots. Doc came around, saw a squat Mex close to the fallen Morez, and the Mex was making every effort to shoot Doc in the back. Doc's hard thumb slid once over the hammer of a Colt and the squat Mex sat down, then slowly bent forward and rubbed his face in the dust.

Dolores, the dancer, was opening the gate and a young hombre was helping her. The red bull thundered through it, with Nora Harnes still clinging to his back. The hombre with Dolores wore the gala suit of a picador. Doc guessed that was where Nora had outfitted herself.

Nora's white face turned toward Doc and she cried out shrilly:

"You fool! You had to come back! They'll kill you!"

Diablo was on his feet, shouting Mex curses. Bull baiters on bony nags heard his orders and they sent their horses toward the gate.

"Get goin', Dolores!" shouted Doc, dropping to one knee behind one of the posts of the open gate. "My horse, he's down by them pinon trees! Ride like blazes for the ford! Pick up Nora Harnes!"

ANOTHER Mex had caught up the dead one's gun. Lead pounded splinters into Doc's face.

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- Mechanical Side of Sex Union
- Sexual Stimulation; Sexual Adjustment

THE CHARTS

Female Sex Organs, Side View - The Internal Sex Organs - The External Sex Organs - Female Sex Organs, Front View - Entrance to Female Genital Parts - Male Sex Organs, Side View - Male Sex Organs, Front View - Male Reproductive Cell, Front and Side Views.
(Detailed Explanations Accompany Charts.)

"Gives all the advice that anybody needs."—*Journal of American Medical Association.*

Doc had no extra shells, no bullets to waste. So another Mex went down with his face in the dust and the gun he held needed a new hand.

But the horses were plunging toward the gateway, close to it now. A rider started triggering an iron. Doc took a chance at collecting lead, and gathered in a slug that made him sick all over. It seemed to have put a hole in his stomach. But he was pushing the big gate shut, and he hung onto it long enough to cut down on the gunnie rider.

The old horse hit the small gap left in the gateway as the hombre went out of the saddle. Doc wasn't sure he had the strength to make it, but his hooked arm caught the saddle horn and the impetus of the running horse lifted him.

Two other riders piled up at the gate, and Doc was halfway to the river ford before the pursuit strung out. Doc lay low in the saddle and hoped for the best. Then half a dozen dark-faced hombres mounted on good nags and armed, charged around the outside of the bull ring. They were racing to cut him off before he could reach the ford.

Doc had expected Dolores to get Blackie, his own fresh gelding, and double up with Nora Harnes. But he saw Nora still on the red bull, and that amazing chunk of beef was splashing into the river. Nora rolled off as the bull went into the depths of a short swimming channel, but she stayed beside the animal, her hand upon his neck.

Doc had for some little time begun to savvy that Bucko Harnes's gal had met up with that same red bull long before this encounter. Not much time now to think about that. The yelling hombres on the good horses were making it an even race to the river. Doc saw one lift a rifle, heard the crack and saw water jet close to the animal and Nora Harnes.

The nearest of the riders held two six-guns that belched fire. The old bull ring horse staggered under Doc. But another sharper cracking was a Winchester. The two-gun Mex toppled from his saddle and the horse behind him pitched over and threw his rider. Before this new cracking rifle, the other hombres sheered off, pulling up. Diablo Morez was clinging to a saddle and shouting at them with vile vituperation.

"Keel the *gringo* peeg!" he yelled.

Doc's guns were steadied on him for an instant, but the old cayuse coughed and rolled over. Doc's shots were wasted and he was jolted hard. His shirt was soaked with blood over his belt and he was getting sicker.

But he saw a rifle at ground level by the river and the face behind it. Dolores was flat on the ground, the reins of Doc's black gelding hooked over an arm. She was levering cartridges and shooting with calm, deadly accuracy.

FOUR Mex, with Diablo Morez leading them, swung their direction, riding hell bent directly upon the dancer. Doc got Morez then, spilling him from the saddle with one of his last two bullets. And Dolores emptied the saddle of a horse beside Morez. The cayuse of the second fallen hombre slid into the shore sand, lost its footings and fell heavily.

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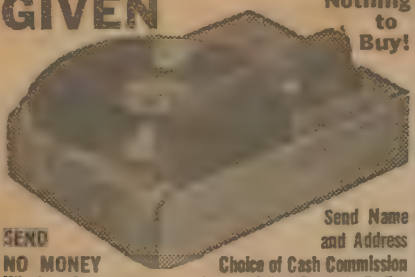

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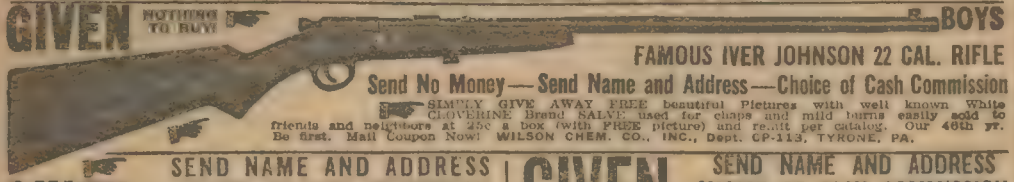

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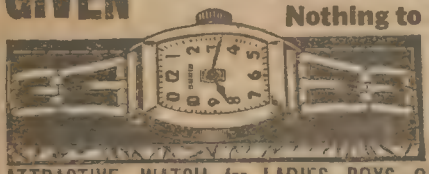

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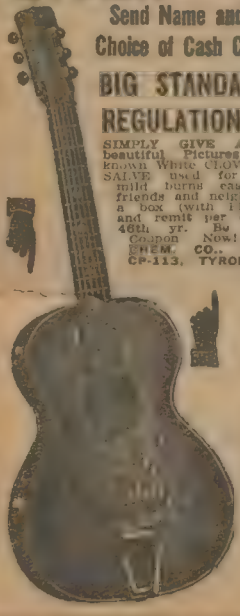

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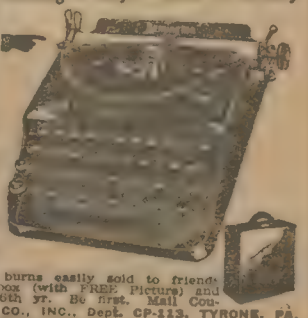

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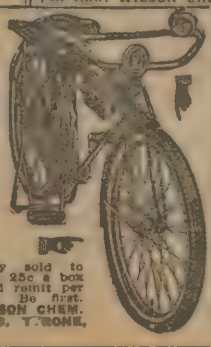

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Doc Reagan moved with the speed of desperation. He was fighting the sick weakness in his stomach as much as the need to beat the remaining two armed riders. Another bullet plucked at him, but he was in the sand beside the struggling horse, gripping bridle leather and shielding himself.

A carbine was stuck into the saddle scabbard and Doc had it out as a slug ripped into the down horse's belly. Doc heard Dolores cry out behind him, and the pain of it told him she had been hit. The two Mex hombres had suddenly grown cautious, reining to either side with the idea of placing bullets in behind the now dying horse.

"Madre Dios!" screamed one abruptly.

His scream and his fall came with the first crack of the carbine in Doc's weakening hands. The second rider turned, lying low and riding away from the deadly marksmanship. Up toward the bull ring, many hombres were clustered. A Mex with a shawl around his shoulders and a dirty bandage around his waist was expounding to them loudly. The Mex words came to Doc.

"Diablo Morez is dead," the shawled Mex was saying. "He has ruled with an iron hand. The Americanos have been made our enemies. I, Don Jose Ramazo, say it. It is good that he has fallen before the red *gringo* bull. We will come to peace with the Americanos, and have no more profit from the cattle smuggling between us. We will burn the house of *Señora* Robla, and we will thank the *gringo* caballero who has broken my arm to save me from a murder."

Doc saw the shawled Mex through a reddening haze, then his vision cleared. This hombre was the man he had prevented killing Diablo Morez, because he had feared for the safety of Nora Harnes. A great splashing started in the river behind Doc. He rolled over.

"Dolores!" cried out the clear voice of Nora. *"Señor* Smith! You are hurt badly, both of you! You have done this to save me!"

Doc Reagan couldn't have become unconscious then as long as Nora Harnes was before his eyes. The gala clothes she had been wearing were torn but still clinging to her lithe young body; her yellow hair was wet and streaming. She looked like some goddess to Doc just then.

"*Señorita* Nora, you must not come back!" cried out Dolores. "Look! The red bull! He ees follow you! It ees the miracle!"

"Miracle nothing," said Nora Harnes. "I hand-fed that longhorn from the time he was a sucklin' calf. He's three years old and he still minds me like a baby. I wasn't much more than a tomboy kid and I taught him to carry me all over dad's ranch. He knows all kinds of tricks."

The red bull splashed out of the river and stood there rumbling in his throat.

"The owlhoots of this Diablo Morez killed my father," said Nora Harnes sadly. "Morez didn't know it. They stole Dandy, and took him for the bull fighting. They didn't know my father was dead, after he had caught them mixing

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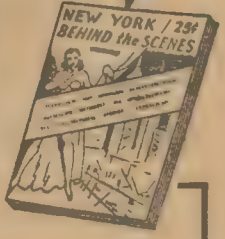

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smuggled stock with his inspected herd, working with a crooked foreman who had been ramroddin' our Nueces river spread.

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THE voice of Dolores, the dancing girl, was strained and weak. Her curving shoulder was dampened with the red flow of blood.

"You weel go now back across the river weeth the *Señor* Smeeth," said Dolores. "Eef I could die, I 'ave been mos' happy for what I 'ave done. I'll never dance"

Doc Reagan somehow was on his feet. That blood soaking his shirt, it was after all from a wound that caused a rib to grate a little. His sickness was leaving him. Nora Harnes was looking at him, and she was tearing off almost her last garment to staunch the wound in Dolores' shoulder.

"I'll be gettin' an extra hoss, Nora Harnes," said Doc. "One that'll pack double. Dolores rides with us back over the Rio. I'll be findin' her a place—"

"You'll be finding her a place, *Señor* Smith, which isn't your rightful name!" flared Nora Harnes. "She already has a home, and it's on the Nueces! You think I'd let her stay here after what she's done? And if you want to see her, you can come ridin' to the—"

"Bucko Harnes' Double-H spread, yo' mean!" exclaimed Doc. "Nora Harnes, I reckon I'll be handin' in my badge as a ranger after this ruckus over the border. So I'll come ridin' soon. I think I'll be ridin' often, to see Dolores and—

"*Señor* Smeeth ees what you call one beeg fool," smiled Dolores wanly. "He weel ride to see the *Señorita* Nora, or I weel not go. If he weel kees me once, then the *señorita.*"

"Well, and why not?" said Nora Harnes and lifted her red lips.

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The importance of preparation—first act the courtship or love-making—second part of the Coitus—many positions possible—final act or climax—half hour all too short for courtship — develop mutual sexual rhythm—reaching a climax together—women often unsatisfied —problems of physical mismatching —overcome these difficulties.

Chapter 6—Secrets of Sex Appeal
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Wolf Breed

(Continued from page 57)

suddenly curt and commanding.

"I'm puttin' yuh on yore horse an' yuh're ridin'," he said. "It is time yuh was gettin' back to the T-S. Keep on hatin' Burke Smith, an' mebbe so some sort o' maverick luck will come strayin' to save the T-S."

She held back, but he pushed her firmly from the cabin, and stood, still masked by the darkness as she rode back down the twisting trail. And Wolf Morgan knew for the first time in his life that his heart rode with a woman.

DAWN struck Black Butte through a misty curtain. Although his nerves cried out against it, and his muscles twitched with weakness from the slowly bleeding wound in his chest, Wolf Morgan never rode more erect.

He glanced occasionally at the limp figure of Rita diamond-hitched with his lass rope across the back of her pinto. He wasn't worried about the hang rope now. For he was making sure there would be no dancing to his death on nothing.

"Should be the upper meadow of the T-S," he said, as a fence showed and a bar gate. "Yup! There's the brand on the top bar."

He got down and let the horses through, mounted and rode on down the slope toward where he guessed the ranchhouse must be. The mist was clearing now. Wolf muttered, at intervals half out of his mind because of the body of Rita on the pinto, and because some of the hell of desire for vengeance was still in him.

"Mebbe so 'twould still be best t' hit for the town an' drill that yeller belly full o' lead," he said. "But I reckon I couldn't nowise make it now, an' the killin' mightn't do Mary any good. Nope! As long as she don't hear my voice, this'll sure enough do it."

The sun slanted through and struck a paper he pulled from his shirt.

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"Cr'rang!"

THE carbine shot rang clearly from a good distance up the broken slope of the meadow. The bullet breezed by so closely, it nipped the flank of the pinto and the pony shied, snorted and jerked at the lead rein in Wolf's hand so unexpectedly that it left his hand.

That was only the first of the fusillade that poured all at once from a ridge off to the left. Wolf reined the red bay around, but the pinto was breaking into a run directly toward the curling blue smoke from the guns. And it was the sudden sight of a girl's flowing black hair and her figure lying across the running pinto that held up the gunfire for a few seconds.

"Damn Burke Smith!" grated Wolf. "Sure as sin he got a sign o' who I might be, an' started a posse out! An' I'll bet the yeller skunk ain't ridin' with 'em either! But I got t' lose 'em!"

Wolf's spurs rolled and the red bay, rested over night and fed, jumped into a swift, running stride. Wolf crouched low, gripping the bay's mane in his weakness. He was confident the bay could outdistance any beast from the town, and he had a brief advantage.

Then bullets started whisking the meadow grass about him. But morbid interest in the girl's body on the pinto had delayed the first movement of the possemen. Wolf headed directly away from the location of the T-S ranchhouse, making for a gullied section of the meadow.

He had a .45 in one hand now, and he triggered it wildly.

"If I can run a ranny on 'em, it makes it all the better," he gritted.

He was making sure his lead went wide of the pursuing lawmen and citizens. The distance widened between the pursuers and the fast red bay. Then the Wolf sent his horse plunging into a twisting gully.

Just as he went over the edge, he saw the gray shape of the log

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and 'dobe ranchhouse of the T-S, and he swore grimly as he realized he had been within half a mile of his goal. Then a hard grin came to his tightened lips.

"Mebbe so there's still a way," he muttered. "If'n I can only hold out."

He was out of sight of the posse now, a dozen hombres or more. Wolf fell rather than rolled from the bay's saddle. He slapped the bay's flank and yelled, and the spirited horse broke away, running up the gully, back in the direction of Black Butte and the malpais.

Wolf scuttled down the gully, slipping among jumbled rocks and clumps of mesquite bush. He saw that a dampness in the gully bed gave hoofprint signs of the direction the bay had taken, and he crawled into the mesquite and lay still.

"The dang-blasted gal killer's headed back for the badlands an' Black Butte!" yelled a posseman. "Short trail across, an' we kin head 'im a couple miles up the meadow!"

Wolf could only hope the red bay would stick to the gully and keep up his speed. He came out of the mesquite and stumbled through the rocks, as the sounds of the pursuit became fainter.

HE WAS crouched a short time later, looking down upon the valleyed ranchhouse of the T-S. He saw a Chinee cookee in the doorway of the bunkhouse. A tall, gaunted man with stooped shoulders came onto the porch of the main house, and Wolf's spine tingled as a bright-haired figure appeared beside him.

Mary Parker put a hand on her dad's arm. Her clear voice came to Wolf. There was excitement in it.

"You ain't fit to be joinin' any chase, dad," she said. "I'm saddlin' Betty an' ridin' up that way to see what it's about."

Damned if Wolf couldn't read apprehension in her voice. As if she might suspect the shooting they had heard shortly before might have something to do with somebody she knew. A stranger who had held her in his arms and kissed her, mebbe so.

Wolf grew very sick, but he fought it back. He opened his shirt and roughly pulled off the bandage and the padding from the bullet wound in his chest. Gritting his teeth, he tore at the edges of the raw flesh, causing the wound to bleed more freely.

The blood welled out now, where for long hours it had been but a slow seeping away of his strength. And, having heard the shooting, Mary Parker and her dad would not question but that the wound had just been received.

"An' the possemen'll be rollin' back come an hour or so," he said to himself softly. "They'll be tellin' as how I tried gunnin' 'em, an' they'll have Rita's body. Mary, I couldn't be doin' this if it wasn't the only way."

He stepped into view of Mary and her dad, and he heard Mary's sharp cry.

"Dad, look! Get your rifle—no, dad! No! You won't be needin' it! He's wounded—he's falling, dad! Lo Wung, come an' help me!"

Wolf had made it halfway to the porch, passing the horse corral.

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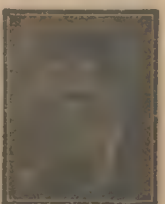

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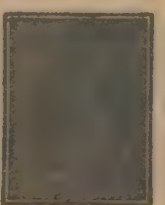

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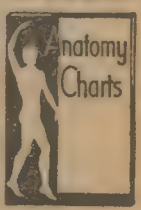

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His knees suddenly turned to water. He slumped down, and he felt consciousness leaving him, but he held on although he closed his eyes and feigned senselessness.

"Dad, oh!" came Mary's voice close to him.

Wolf's eyes were slitted just enough to see that she was far ahead of her dad and the Chinese cook in reaching him. Her soft hand was pushing away his Stetson, stroking back his hair.

He didn't have to pretend unconsciousness any longer. Wolf wasn't aware that Mary was pulling up her gingham dress, tearing away the white petticoat underneath and bunching it into a padding to stop the leaking of the blood.

Wolf Morgan accomplished the purpose of his idea of the night before. The notice of the $10,000 reward, dead or alive, was inside his shirt.

WOLF MORGAN did not know he was talking, babbling incoherences in the delirium of the fever in his brain. He was unaware that at the first sound of his voice that the blue eyes of Mary Parker had widened, and that she was staring at his clean-cut features with a trembling sob on her lips.

"Hank" Parker had a paper in his hands.

"Sure'n tunket, Mary, it's him," he said, peering through his steel-rimmed spectacles. "Scars fittin' on his jaw an' his head as the reward notice says. Ten thousan' reward, an' they was word yesterday of him gunnin' Sheriff Horton over at San Rajo. Says dead or alive, Mary."

"Dad! Dad! please stop! Don't

read it any more! You don't know—you couldn't take that kind of *dinero,* dad! Please, Lo Wung! Bring me more hot water! I won't let 'im die—I can't!"

"Shucks, Mary, what's worritin' yuh, honey?" said Henry Parker, his deep, frosty old eyes concerned for her. "Yuh know yore dad wouldn't be takin' no blood money 'cause of a dyin' pilgrim comin' to his door. Reckon he's paid, Mary, an' it's fitten now that he passes out this way rather than at the loop end o' a hang rope—"

"Dad! Stop talking!" Mary almost screamed the words at him. "He ain't dyin', I tell you! I won't let 'im! He's got to live! You hear, dad! Yuh ride for Doc Ransome fast!"

Henry Parker's frosty old eyes took on a sudden questioning, but there was warmth there, too. He was looking at Mary and her mouth was tight upon this dying owlhooter's lips, silencing his delirious talking for the moment, her arms holding him as if by her sheer will and the breath from her own body she would hold him from death.

Then, Wolf was talking again, more slowly, weakly, and his words were making sense.

"Rita, I didn't mean—to hit yuh so hard—Rita—tell the—the truth—the San Rajo lawman shot me—but Palo Gomez killed him—an' I gunned Palo for doin' it—yuh tell 'em the truth, Rita—the Stimsons gulched an' murdered my brother Joe—I been long ridin'—an' now yuh're dead, Rita, an' yuh can't ever tell the truth—Mary—" His voice trailed off.

Mary was on her knees, and she looked at his closed eyes. She saw

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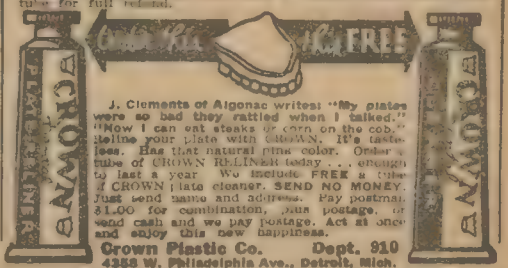

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the blood had almost stopped seeping from the wound.

"Yes, Wolf Morgan, yes," she murmured into his ear. "I'm here with you, Wolf. Oh—"

Sobs broke her voice.

"I'm dodgin' the hang rope, Mary—yore dad can pay off that yeller bellied skunk now—Joe, they gulched yuh, an' I went owlhootin' to get 'em—but I killed Rita—she lied—she—I was honin' to kill Burke Smith — but I couldn't — couldn't make it—"

His voice died away. Mary screamed. Only Lo Wung, the cook, was there. Her dad was riding for Doc Ransome.

"It ain' fair!" Mary was crying out. "Oh, God! you *can't* die!"

Lo Wung's yellow lips smiled a little and he stepped closer.

"He nevee die, Missee Mary," he said. "See, missee, he allee good sleep now. He be allee light."

Mary's arms were tight around him.

WOLF MORGAN felt as if he had just hit the ground off a bucker and was getting to his feet. Blue chintz curtains were on a window. The voices of several hombres muttered, then shaped into words Wolf could understand.

"Yuh can't keep 'im from payin' with his life for the killin' o' Sheriff Horton, Parker, even if there was mebbe good reason for gunnin' them Stimsons who got his brother," said a harsh voice. "I got my duty to do, as marshal o' Black Butte. He's been long ridin' an owlhooter, an' if yuh're dang old fool enough not to c'lect the reward dinero, I ain't so squeamish."

"To all hell with the reward money, Spillman!" cracked out Henry Parker's voice. "Mary says as how he never gunned the San Rajo's sheriff, an' she's goin' to prove it."

"How, Parker?" growled Marshal Spillman. "They's a dozen San Rajons saw 'im shootin', and heard that Mex gal name him as the killer o' the sheriff.

"That's right, Parker," came other voices.

Wolf heard, and he understood, but his weakness was too great for him to speak at once, and before he could have rallied, there was a commotion in the adjoining room. Wolf's eyes were seeing clearly now, and he imagined it was all a fantastic dream.

For he saw Rita, the Mexican girl, and she was being propelled into the room with a hand twisted into her long, black hair. And that hand belonged to Mary Parker. In Mary's other hand was a shining, small calibre gun, and it was jammed into Rita's shrinking back.

Wolf was convinced now this was all one of those dreams a man has just before he dies, or maybe afterward. For Rita was very much alive, and she was screaming invectives as Mary's hand pulled her head back and tightened the twist in her hair.

"You talk now, you yellow devil cat!" rang out Mary's voice. "You tell 'em the truth about that San Rajo killin', or so help me I'll pistol whip you with this gun an' make you as ugly as your own rotten soul!"

"I'll not do eet—I'll not tell the truth!" screamed Rita, attempting to free herself.

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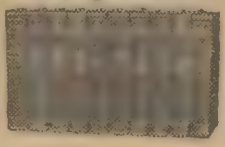

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THE men in the room gaped.

The beautiful Mex girl had had her skirt almost stripped from her body. Her neck and shoulders were covered with gouged scratches. And then Wolf saw Mary as they came farther into the room. Mary's blue eyes were blazing fire.

Mary's dress was torn, too, and her face was deeply scratched and filled with little bloody lines.

"Glory Be, Mary!" gasped Henry Parker. "What in time yuh think yuh're doin'?"

"I'm makin' this Mex devil tell the truth if I have to kill her!" blazed Mary. "Wolf Morgan never killed the sheriff at San Rajo, but he gunned out Palo Gomez who did, an' Rita was Palo's girl! Tell 'em, Rita, or you get it right across that pretty nose of yours!"

Mary whirled the Mex girl around, and Rita clawed at her savagely.

"You love thees Wolf who keel and keel and keel!" screamed Rita. "That ees why I weel never tell the truth! Never! Never!"

Marshal Spillman trapped Mary's wrist. Perhaps Mary could not have pistol whipped the Mex's pretty face as she had promised, but not even her own dad was sure that she wouldn't.

"Easy, Mary," said the marshal. "Ain't yuh seein', child, yuh win what yuh set out to do. So yuh won't tell the truth about who killed Sheriff Horton, Rita? So that gives us the truth. Yuh're right, Parker, but I'm honin' to know how in time Wolf Morgan come to want to die in yore house so's yuh could c'lect that reward?"

Mary was calmer now, and her voice was quiet. The sobbing Rita lay in a heap on the floor.

"I'll tell you why Wolf Morgan wanted dad to have that reward money," said Mary. "Why he made his way here and tore the bandage off a wound so that he might die that way instead of by the hang rope. I'll show you something."

She came back from another room with a dress in her hands. The bosom of it was rusty with dried blood. She held it up as the possemen and Henry Parker became speechless and listened.

"Maybe you'll think I'm shameless," said Mary calmly.

"No, Mary, no!" Wolf tried to make her hear him, but his weakness gave him but a whispering that no one but himself could hear.

"I'm proud of the blood on that dress, for it is blood from Wolf Morgan's wound, and it came there last night in a cabin on Black Butte," went on Mary.

Henry Parker's frosty blue eyes hardened at first, and then there came anger and pride, and his gray head lifted high as Mary told every detail of how she had met Wolf Morgan in the darkness, how he had saved her, and how he had sent her away with only his kisses to fire her heart.

"So the wound already was there," said Mary of Wolf Morgan as she finished. "I found the bandage he had torn off. He thought I wouldn't hear his voice, and I wouldn't know him. That dad would have the reward money when he died. Oh—"

Mary's calm broke and she turned. She was looking into Wolf's steady gray eyes. He had been trying to whisper, to shake his head, to stop her, but all he could do now was watch her come to him.

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"Don't yuh worry, Parker! Don't yuh worry none whatsoever! When we git through with Burke Smith, he won't be doin' no more bankin' business in Black Butte!"

Henry Parker's head was high and his blue eyes kindled.

"It's right good o' yuh, Spillman," he said. "But I was in t' see Burke's dad yesterday, an' his mind was clear. He renewed that note for another year, an' Burke knowed it. Mary, 'stead o' bein' ashamed for yuh, I'm almighty proud."

Wolf Morgan was able to whisper to her at last.

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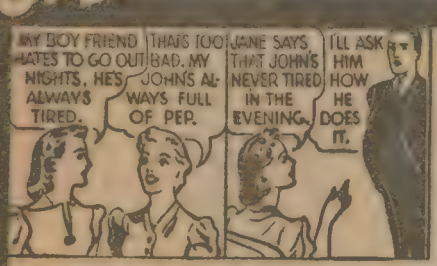
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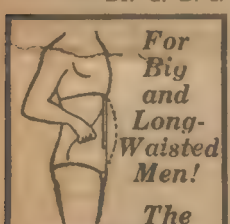

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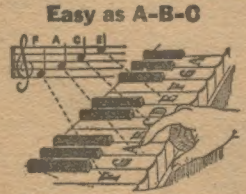

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